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THE EIGHT GUESTS

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By the same Author

MR. JOHN STROOD

MR. BAILEY-MARTIN

THE WEST END

PARK LANE

THE SYSTEM

THE PATIENT MAN

ETC

THE EIGHT GUEST

BY
PERCY WHITE

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TO
Edith Bigelow
WHO
GAVE ME THE IDEA

September 1906

THE EIGHT GUESTS

CHAPTER I

MARCUS HART was so much the richest member of "The Enlighteners" that, as he sometimes told himself, he could have bought up all the other members (debts and all) without suffering the least pecuniary inconvenience.

Born in Whitechapel, Marcus had grown up in Maida Vale. He had received his education, as a popular book of reference informed the curious, "at Brighton." The progress of his family was perfectly simple. It followed the inevitable law which, no doubt for some all-wise purpose that the future of the British Empire will disclose, permits those provided with teeth and claws to scramble to the top. Hart senior made the first move forward. A wave of financial prosperity swept him from the East End to the respectable skirts of the West. The son's own efforts carried him to the goal. He became a British Agent of the Amalgamated Oloptic Trust—a bewildering combination of Life Insurance coupled with a system of Banking which, after devastating investors' interests in the United States, now flourishes under another name. Marcus, trained in the Oloptic methods in Chicago, prospered exceedingly. His wonderful financial scent led him to a partnership. A little later he took over the management of the British branches, and finally, at the age of forty, retired with vast wealth, and descended on his native

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time on the Mayfair side of it) to enjoy his in golden leisure. Although hated and in New York as one of the Oloptic gang, Society discovered nothing in his reputation to justify the closing of its silent gates. Society is prepared to overlook much in men and women who can help it glitter. Marcus Hart had what it wants most—an exhaustless purse and a lavishly picturesque hand wherewith to entertain. The West in this owes not a little to the East. In the higher social life what we call character is less necessary for success than it is believed to be in politics. Success and worth are usually indistinguishable by means of all kinds, so Society swallowed Marcus without a wry face in spite of his obscure origin and the light the American newspapers had thrown on his exploits as a financier.

What is roared in New York becomes a faint whisper in London. Self-acquired wealth is as respectable as inherited rank in the eyes of a world which welcomes plutocrats. It was true that when Hart was represented to distinguished American citizens as a product of their system, they vigorously denied the claim.

The possessors of great wealth are often visible only through the mirage it creates. Women were not wanting who agreed that Marcus had "an air of distinction." Certainly he differed much from the well-fed, well-groomed, well-grown English type, taught, by three generations of unbroken prosperity, to regard itself as the salt of the earth. A short, thick-set, black-browed man, what remained of Hart's dark hair curled round the back of his head and nape of his sturdy neck in bull-like vigour, leaving a forehead bare and shiny. His heavy black moustache, however, and thick predatory nose contradicted the benevolent aspect borrowed from his bare brows. His eyes, which admirers described as "beautiful," were beady and bright, but their unshrinking gaze gave no clue to what might be working within. The

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first impression made by the man was that formidable—an impression his suavity usually fled after acquaintance. The cosmopolitan wherein financial magnates with a taste for oriental magnificence chiefly flourish, in matters of moral cannot afford to be exacting. Rumour is an invisible force which makes no visible effects on the strongholds of wealth. What is not actually seen is governed by the same rule as that which does not exist.

A certain standard of moral rectitude is assumed until its absence has been demonstrated. The evidence demanded is, however, rarely attainable outside a court of law. Without this latitude Society, as at present constituted, would scarcely hold together. The interests of the majority prevent the ostracism of the individual whose claims to recognition are buttressed on riches.

With all these forces in his favour, Hart had not been a year in London before he believed his power and his position secure. A vague feeling of resentment difficult to describe accompanied this conviction. He felt that he was tolerated for the world's convenience and not his own. The unspoken message of the men reached him. "Whilst we were at Eton," said the voice, "you were an office boy! But if you are not a gentleman you're immensely rich. We want what you've got; you envy what we've acquired. We'll make the best of you and help you to become the best copy of us that you can!"

This venomous suspicion, due perhaps to an obscure oriental atavism hidden in the man's mind behind all his dealings with the world, wrecked the complete enjoyment of his personal triumph. The pride of the man who has risen from the muddy depths usually suffers after the polished surface has been reached. Although Hart believed that he despised the men who now treated him apparently as one of themselves, in reality he regarded them with the respect which is rooted in malice. They

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with a lustre which he could only clumsily if he despised them when measured by his brutal values of success, he nevertheless admired them for the useless but graceful accomplishments he lacked. Their social touch was light; his, he felt, was heavy, and he floundered uneasily among their subtler conventions. These might adjust themselves to the environment his weight created, but he saw them rise again after his car had rolled over them.

Sometimes Hart wondered whether this secret deference were worthy of him, but the payment of it was involuntary. Certain ancestral instincts of propitiation led him along the path in spite of himself. Having won his throne he accepted the rules which gave his power widest sway.

Society had received him when best prepared to assimilate men such as himself. Old aristocratic obstacles had been swept away by the golden blast of wealth. Moreover, Marcus had been initiated in the elementary rules by a suitable guide in return for services rendered. D. A. Porter—the notorious Dan Porter—was at the time the driving wheel of the Amalgamated Oloptic in New York; Minnie Porter was the magnate's only daughter. At the same moment the Marquis of Gaintry (a childless widower of fifty with encumbered estates) was a Director of an affiliated Oloptic Company in London. Between these two branches Marcus Hart formed an efficient link. The marriage which was arranged between the Marquis and Minnie Porter was due to Hart's diplomacy. The problem was not difficult. Minnie was anxious to marry a British peer; Hart was aware that Lord Gaintry was seeking an heiress; he also knew that Mr. Porter was prepared to settle 500,000*l.* on his daughter when she married. The situation seemed to Mr. Hart propitious for retiring from the Oloptic with his accumulated spoil, and plunging into the delights of the brilliant world on which, years ago as a lad, Hart had cast envious eyes from the respectable seclusion of Maida Vale. He crossed the Atlantic

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and unfolded his scheme to Lord Gaintry, returning to New York with the marquis as his guest. His lordship was informed that "Dan" would be a generous father-in-law. The girl, whose portrait was rarely out of the ladies' newspapers, had already taken her place among recognized American beauties. Two simple ambitions seeking an attainable object are easily realized. Six months later Minnie Porter became Marchioness of Gaintry; two months after the marriage Mr. Hart, free from the toils and troubles of Oloptic finance, was an honoured though criticised guest at Gaintry Castle. Thus Marcus found himself entrenched behind his money-bags in the very heart of the Promised Land. His first step (taken under excellent advice) was to surround himself with the necessary attributes. It chanced that Winchford House and its magnificent estates were in the market. These Hart purchased. At the same time he acquired in Mayfair the imposing mansion recently rebuilt for a rival magnate whose ambitions the fall in South African mining markets had defeated. Thus equipped Marcus started in the race to win, or rather, to purchase popularity. In two years his aim had been accomplished. His name appeared with those of the men and women whom an intelligently popular press has decided to describe as "leaders of society." It meant that his influence was recognized from the City to West Kensington, and that august personages had shot his pheasants in the Winchford preserves.

"A capital record for two years' work," said Captain Norbert, former private secretary to the Marquis of Gaintry when his lordship had been in office and honorary secretary of the Enlighteners' Club, for which Hart's name had been proposed as a member.

The committee of the club, which consisted of fifty lady members and five gentlemen, was holding its monthly meeting at Mrs. Chesterfield's house in Pont Street. At that moment the club justly considered itself the most exclusive association of smart and brilliant women in London. Men were only acceptable in so

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to a few big names might be supposed to give to a collective effort to satisfy the earnest longings of women of fashion for the higher joys of the mind.

Hart's candidature displeased Captain Norbert. He had just ascertained that he was powerless to prevent his election.

"The club isn't intended," he said, "to provide amusement for millionaires."

"Why not, if it's the right sort of amusement?" replied Mrs. Chesterfield, who was in the chair by the rule of the club which accorded the honour to the hostess.

"If I understand the purpose of the club," returned the secretary, "it is 'to encourage the growth of flowers in our mind.' Those were the words the duchess used at our preliminary meeting."

"I found them for her in a book," murmured Miss Arden.

"They are most apt," said the secretary approvingly.

"I suppose flowers can grow in other people's minds as well as ours," said Mrs. Chesterfield, a little irritably.

"When there's the right sort of soil," observed Captain Norbert. "I don't believe the candidate for election can provide that."

"I wish you would be serious, Captain Norbert," returned Mrs. Chesterfield petulantly; "you know as well as I do that Mr. Hart *must* be elected."

"I don't quite see why," observed Miss Arden, the only unmarried lady on the committee, and a cousin of the Duchess of Evesham, who was on the committee for the purpose of expressing her grace's views, but who invariably favoured whatever opinion Norbert might desire to impress on the meeting.

"I think it's perfectly plain," returned Mrs. Chesterfield. "It is a matter of policy."

"You mean that Mr. Hart would make it hot for the club if it chucks him?" suggested Captain Norbert relapsing from his secretarial manner,

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"I mean that the club can't afford ~~to~~ she replied.

"Well, I haven't a vote," murmured Norbert, with an air of resignation.

The seven committee ladies were depressed by the captain's voice. As a rule they accepted his guidance. He knew, they said, so much more of the world than they did. But the present was an exceptional occasion.

"But Mr. Hart isn't an 'intellectual,'" said Miss Arden resolutely, breaking a rather strained silence. "I don't see why we should stretch our rules to swallow him."

"He'll swallow us if we do," murmured the secretary in an aside which, however, all the committee heard.

"Come : what's the real objection to his election?" asked Mrs. Chesterfield.

"He'll demoralize us," said Miss Arden.

"Nonsense!" said Lady Horham. "He won't demoralize me."

"It seems to me," said Mrs. Kingston, "that it's too late to talk about it. Mr. Hart must be elected simply because he must."

"Yes, that's exactly it!" exclaimed Lady Horham and Mrs. Field together, glancing at the hon. secretary with an air of deprecation.

"A majority of one in favour of the candidate," said Norbert, who was growing bored. "So be it."

Then suddenly Miss Arden, Mrs. Tracy, and Mrs. Mundsley discovered that they had voted against the new member, and the two latter ladies felt slightly nervous. Suppose Mrs. Chesterfield told Mr. Hart! She was "very thick" with him.

The secretary stroked his chin a little wearily. Hart had told him that he was up for election. Norbert had replied that he would see what could be done. The ladies, he added, were "a little capricious." He now discovered that the majority had been "capricious" on the opposite side.

"It is a very difficult position," he murmured to Miss Arden.

Miss Arden, who hated being beaten, was looking at Mrs. Chesterfield's pretty hat, which she thought "too young," with a critical air to hide her annoyance.

"That's all the business for the committee?" said the Chair.

"Yes," replied Norbert. "Our minutes will record Mr. Hart's election."

The committee broke up and retired to the drawing-room, where tea was served.

"Hart nobbled the committee," said Captain Norbert to Miss Arden. "Fellows of that sort leave nothing to chance. 'We're licked and must make the best of it!'"

Hart's election was received with mixed feelings by the Enlighteners, who were waiting for the decision of their committee in Mrs. Chesterfield's drawing-room. Some maintained that it would have added to the prestige of the club to have rejected him, others arguing that, since the new member was prepared to pay magnificently for the honour done him, the policy of the committee was reasonable. Hart could put people on to such capital things, and it was fair to believe that his charity would begin at home, with chosen members of the Enlighteners.

"It isn't as though any of us had undue respect for wealth," observed Norbert, "but that we all recognize the necessity of wealth in other people. It's really a delicate form of altruism. I think I ought to ask for a salary. I mean, of course, after 'Marcus the Magnificent' has been made treasurer."

But Mrs. Chesterfield told Lady Horham that it was a great pity that Captain Norbert was so fond of sneering. There was, she considered, enough malicious gossip in the club without the secretary's encouragement. She only hoped that Mr. Hart might never know what was said about him!

Having overheard this speech, Miss Arden thus

interpreted it: "She means to tell Mr. H. what Captain Norbert thinks of him."

Before she left she warned him.

"You make me feel like Ajax defying the lightning," he said laughing. "If he only knows it, Marcus has much to thank me for. But he has not done with me yet. I mean him to be made treasurer."

"But we've no treasury," Emilia Arden replied.

"He must supply that!"

The Enlighteners' Club owed its being to the sudden interest which a distinguished group of ladies had taken in "the things of the mind." It represented a reaction. Other clubs, "Ghosts," for instance, and "The Nth Power Club," both of which had been killed by the success of the Enlighteners, had sprung from the same shadowy aspirations.

The collective tastes of the little luxury-loving cliques, upheaved by troubled social strata beneath, perhaps for some obscure purpose in national decoration, are liable to freakish changes of view. They may grow weary even of pretending to be wicked, but without attitudes, definite and sustained, they become merged in the mimicking mob blundering on their heels. Whenever, therefore, imitators are too many, tricks are changed. The smart world had abandoned its assumption of delicate and mysterious profligacy. As the Duchess of Evesham pointed out at the time, "The Divorce Court had always been too popular with the masses for the support of the classes. The world must learn that there were other standards besides those taught by the profane." Other leaders in the set, moreover, agreed that they could no longer afford to be an excuse for common people's wickedness. After all, the world was not governed on base principles. The time had come for a serious change of conduct on the part of those responsible for creating the moral atmosphere. Suddenly, as though by magic, a little band of expensive pilgrims found themselves cultivating "goodness" and "sweetness." For a week or two smart women actually exchanged visits for the pur-

pose to "doing one another good!" A revival beginning in the East End touched the West. Mayfair's conscience was stirred. But a prolonged pose of pensive beatitude at such a fervid temperature of soul was of course impossible for restless and highly-strung beauties. Just when an elegant form of the Salvation Army was expected to come into being, the movement found relief in a bewildering variety of religions, creeds and superstitions, from the joys of an ornate ritual at one end of the scale to the worship of totems on the other. Teachers and adepts of all kinds were discovered—Buddhists and Confucians, dealers in the miraculous and expounders of self-invented dogmas dimly associated with Plato.

But the bigger faiths were for the serious-minded. Women who "couldn't think without a headache"—who believed "there must be something or they wouldn't be there!" satisfied "the empty feeling in their hearts" on lighter things. For their comfort a crowd of crystal-gazers, star-gazers, fortune-tellers and dealers in mysteries generally, grew up like mushrooms from a soil fertilized by the demand. The "religious revival" broke up into a shallow and foaming wave of fashionable wizardry. Seers with mesmeric eyes, whose fateful predictions were marvellously fulfilled, sprang, as it were, by magic from the pockets of brilliant social leaders. Mrs. Chesterfield discovered two (one had predicted her aunt's death to the very hour!), Lady Horham was equally successful; whilst Mrs. Kington unearthed, in a tobacco-shop in Poplar, a wonderful Eurasian lady, who read the events of to-morrow with almost as much ease as the news of to-day. But, of course, the thing was overdone. The taint spread to the middle class, where, in the eyes of initiators, it seemed an absurd craze. Follies cease to attract the elect when cultivated by the many. The whirl of ideas, however, had prepared the way for "the intellectual life!" It was agreed that there were such things as brains. The next pose was, therefore, purely intellectual. Mrs. Chesterfield, who had been

an esoteric Buddhist, a sentimental agnostic, and finally a believer in her own prophet (the gentleman who predicted her aunt's decease), now discovered that what was wanted to satisfy her yearning was the right sort of philosophy. Mrs. Tracy, Mrs. Mundsley, and Lady Horham helped her find it. It was taught by a learned doctor with a long Polish name in voluble but imperfect English. What the world needed, he told it, was only the right sort of amusement. He demonstrated this by conjuring with the name of Plato, Passion and Love. He even touched on "maternity," a delicate subject for an audience with empty nurseries! His doctrine, that the blindest and apparently least unselfish form of Love sprang from unconscious altruism, touched hearts which had but lately passed through the fires of assumed profligacy. Smart drawing-rooms suddenly grew thick with ideas. West End libraries were compelled to stock quite serious books. Bunker on *Platonics and other Stimulants*, for example. Some "centre" for all this "intellectual activity," of course, was needed. "The Enlighteners" was started by a band of beautiful and philosophic ladies for the purpose of filling this no longer "hidden want." Captain Norbert was persuaded to become their secretary. Under the auspices of this society lectures of extreme brilliancy ("all about Love with a big L," those unadmitted whispered) were heard with wrapt attention. Suddenly the world discovered that it was fashionable to be clever, that flippancy towards the things of the mind was vulgar. "*Cultivons nos Jardins!*" proposed the Duchess of Evesham, with vague memories of a French author read years ago in the school-room. "It's quite time we remembered we have intellects as well as souls and bodies!"

"The Enlighteners' Club," in fact, represented a gallant effort to follow this advice. It prospered as it deserved. There was a run on the club. The newspapers spoke of it as of something radiant in its aloofness from the fashionable herd, who

pretended "they wouldn't join even if they were asked."

But what did Mr. Marcus Hart hope to get out of a club that had no home? In the first place he had bet his friend the Baron Altenstein that he would get elected. In the second, it would give him the *entrée* of the Duchess of Evesham's drawing-room. Besides this, it represented an obstacle to be overcome. He knew that "Norbert was dead against him," and Marcus was a born fighter.

CHAPTER II

MR. HART'S rapidly growing crowd of friends were accustomed (usually after profiting by it) to speak of "his princely way of doing things." Less indulgent critics of his methods, however, described them in less flattering phrases. In the intricate flow of social traffic the line between amiable generosity and adroit corruption is not easily distinguishable.

"My dear lady," he said to Mrs. Chesterfield, "you must get me elected. You really must!"

Persuaded that it would be made worth her while she had set to work and captured a majority on the committee.

The occasion seemed to Marcus Hart one well suited for a display of his graceful approval as well as for a certain confession that he desired to make as dramatically as possible. Each of the four ladies, therefore, received a variant of the same note inviting them to lunch. His "little lunches" were well known and eagerly sought. Each lady had grounds for hoping that there was more behind their host's expressions of gratitude than appeared on the surface.

"It ought to be rather interesting," Mrs. Chesterfield remarked to her three allies. "I wonder what he wants to tell us?"

The others wondered too. Lady Horham hoped it was nothing compromising.

"For him?" asked Mrs. Kingdon.

"No! for us," the other answered.

"He says," said Mrs. Chesterfield, glancing at her note, "that it's a confession he has to make. Now a man of that sort confesses nothing unless it's to his advantage."

"Naturally," returned Lady Horham. "So long as he doesn't want us to do something unpleasant, it should be rather amusing."

They went to Mr. Hart's full of expectation, Mrs. Kington the least cheerful of the group. Hitherto she had supported Captain Norbert's party; but the combined pressure of Lady Horham and Mrs. Chesterfield in this instance had won her from her allegiance.

"Just think of the splendid tips Marcus can give you if he likes!" Mrs. Chesterfield had urged to win her vote for their candidate.

"And he will if you vote for him. We'll see to that," Lady Horham had added.

But after the committee meeting Captain Norbert had said, *Et tu, Brute!* and Mrs. Kington knew enough Latin to feel the reproach. Emilia Arden, too, who had been very angry, had said in her hearing, that the committee was a hot-bed of intrigue. Therefore, as she mounted Mr. Hart's magnificent staircase Mrs. Kington's conscience smote her. Moreover she was afraid what the duchess, who had not been consulted, might say.

Luncheon was served in a small circular room, all white, gold and pink that overlooked the Park. Above the trees, faintly touched by the hand of a reluctant spring, the giant head and shoulders of The Achilles braved the whistling wind. Lady Horham sat on Hart's right, Mrs. Chesterfield on his left. Mrs. Kington was furthest from her host. In each lady's place, beside a bouquet of exquisite roses, was a small parcel inscribed with her name. Four pairs of eyes glistened as they beheld them. Four hearts gave a bound of expectancy which, in beings less delicately organized, might have been mistaken for greed.

"Quite a quaint little feast!" said the host genially, rubbing his clumsy hands. "Only me, and you four—what! Couldn't let the world in to our little secrets, could we? I look on the occasion as a sort of birth-

day! Thanks to you ladies, I have been re-born an Enlighthener!"

"Oh, Mr. Hart! you really ought not!" exclaimed Lady Horham.

"No, indeed, indeed you ought not!" thrilled Mrs. Chesterfield.

Amidst the murmurs of gratitude Mrs. Kington felt as though she were blushing.

"Look at 'em first," said the host in the off-hand manner copied from the young men of his acquaintance; "'pon me word they ain't half bad."

"Half bad!" cried Mrs. Field, opening the case, "they're too lovely—too lovely for words."

"Much too costly and lavish!" gushed Mrs. Chesterfield, whose swift glance had revealed the fact that her diamonds were finest.

"A sort of badge, isn't it?" asked Mrs. Kington, already conscious that hers were the least expensive.

"Why! they're little owls! dear little owls!" gushed Mrs. Field, holding the brooch against the light.

"Of course they are!" said Lady Horham. "And what a charming compliment! The bird of Minerva, don't you know."

"That's it," said Hart, "the wise fowl! Not a bad totem. I'm keen on totems."

"What a perfectly delicious idea!" murmured the ladies.

"It doesn't mean we're owls?" suggested Mrs. Kington, playfully.

"No. Mr. Hart means it for a sort of class badge don't you, Mr. Hart?"

Mrs. Chesterfield had answered for her host.

"You've hit it, dear lady."

Once more the brooches were studied. Four hungry little brains did four eager little sums in mental arithmetic. Certainly some friendships were worth cultivating.

"If you got what you deserved," said the gallant Marcus to his four guests, "you'd have totems set in diamonds as big as the dome of St. Paul's."

Then the jewels were pinned in their dresses and lunch began.

The ladies were now tuned to his key. Hart, a man of experience, believed that women would "do anything" for diamonds. He had, he said, never met the other sort. Glancing round his table, he studied the situation. Excitement and champagne had unloosed the tongues of his guests. The contrast between *sans gêne* and ceremony interested him. It was his creation.

The tall footmen handed the dishes with a solemnity that suggested the administration of a religious rite to the priestesses of some joyous cult. It was a rum go, he said to himself, reverting to the boyish vocabulary of Maida Vale—a very rum go. What was it all leading to? Still it was something to think that he'd squeezed himself in where, according to Baron Altenstein, Lord Severnford had been unable to creep.

"Is it true you chucked Lord Severnford at your place?" he asked.

The chatter ceased. Three of the ladies felt themselves regretting a baseless rumour.

"No," replied Lady Horham. "Some people said so, but his name never really came up."

"Why, Altenstein told me you rejected him," said Hart.

"No. When Lord Severnford heard there were only five men members, he thought better of it," Mrs. Kington explained, the others thought unnecessarily. "The poor man was frightened!"

"Clara Dunsmore wanted to bring him in," added Mrs. Field. "They say she wanted to marry him before she married her husband."

"If his name had come up before us," observed Mrs. Chesterfield, to comfort Mr. Hart, "it isn't by any means certain he would have been elected, is it, Mary?"

"One can never be sure with us," Lady Horham assented. "He has never done anything but be

Lord Severnford, and show his beautiful white teeth at his own jokes. 'The Enlighteners' want something besides beauty!"

"You ladies supply that, I take it!" said the host.

"The poor Baron is always getting hold of the wrong end of the stick," said Mrs. Kington. "Lord Severnford is one of the nicest men in London, and it's a pity he was too much afraid of the Thracians to risk his head."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Marcus.

"The vain creature pretended he was Orpheus, don't you know?" Mrs. Kington replied.

"I'm blessed if I do," said Hart.

Then Mrs. Chesterfield, who had made herself acquainted with the career of Orpheus in order to fully appreciate Lord Severnford's banter, explained in simple language.

"What! tore off the chap's head and chucked it in the river because he wouldn't make love to 'em?" exclaimed Hart, really amused. "You surprise me!"

"We've grown a good deal more modest and less exacting since the Thracian ladies let themselves go," said Lady Horham playfully.

But Mrs. Kington once more felt called upon to assert herself.

"It was Captain Norbert's fault," she said. "He's afraid the club will go to pieces if we let in men of that sort."

"Of what sort?" asked Hart quickly.

"The sort that turn the thing into a joke, but whom we daren't reject," returned Mrs. Kington, again comparing the lustre of her diamonds disparagingly with those sparkling on Mrs. Chesterfield's corsage.

Mrs. Kington's indiscretion annoyed the others, especially as they believed jealousy was the cause of it. She defended herself stoutly. "There's no reason," she said, "why Mr. Hart shouldn't know the truth. It's right he should know we didn't get him in without a fight."

"A fight," he said. "Come, now, I like you!"

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Captain Norbert told me he would see what could be done."

"He meant," said Mrs. Kingston, "done to keep you out."

"Please," said Mrs. Chesterfield, "don't be silly."

"But, my dear ladies!" interposed Hart, "do let us be frank. You don't suppose I didn't really know what Norbert was up to. Men are quite as jealous as women. In his place I should have done as he did!"

"How very nice of you to say that," observed Lady Horham soothingly.

"Then there's Miss Arden," Hart resumed. "She was dead against me."

"Emilia Arden simply does what Captain Norbert wants," said Mrs. Kingston.

"I don't think that's quite a fair thing to say of her," said Mrs. Field with an air of candid impartiality.

"I only meant on the committee," Mrs. Kingston explained.

"Of course you did!" said Mr. Hart. "But why shouldn't I know how things stand? When you told me what a shave it was, Mrs. Chesterfield, I naturally guessed why. I'm all the more grateful to you ladies. At the same time I have not the slightest grudge against Norbert and Miss Arden. I was amused to hear that he calls me 'Marcus the Magnificent!' I take it as a compliment."

"So it is!" exclaimed Mrs. Chesterfield. "A compliment to your wonderful companies."

"And extraordinary financial talents," added Lady Horham.

"I suppose that's what he does mean," observed Mrs. Kingston innocently, "but they tell me I've no humour."

Norbert's sneers at Hart in reality had deeply angered him. He had expected his wealth to crush disrespect, but here was an insolent young fellow with an income smaller than Mr. Hart's *chef* deriding him all over London! Norbert had set Miss Arden

against him. Norbert had discovered in America reasons which disqualified Hart for marriage in England. Norbert had dared to put spokes in the wheels of the magnate's triumphant car. The effect of this indirect but irritating opposition had increased the man's lust of conquest. If he admired Miss Arden more than any woman in London, it was quite as much because she seemed furthest removed from his clutches as because he found her the most attractive in a world where attractiveness has become a profession. He had sought the place which he had acquired because it seemed the centre of a promised region where all things are purchasable. He had bought much, but was now learning that for some dealings he held the wrong currency. His wealth could not save him from the ridicule of his enemies. Both Captain Norbert and Emilia Arden had stung him. Hart's friend, Baron Altenstein, had repeated a joke made at their joint expense.

"After the flies bite us," the Baron had complained, "Norbert says you and I scratch each other's golden hides to cure the sting!"

When the Marquis of Gaintry had accompanied Hart to America, Captain Norbert had joined his chief there. It was in New York that Norbert met Mrs. Hart, a lady once on the music-hall stage, whom, in his rash youth, Hart had married before a Registrar in Brixton. The marriage had not been a happy one, but Mrs. Hart had so far been careful it should not be dissolved. To seek relief in the English courts would have created scandals that her husband feared to face.

"I've peculiar claims on Hart's affections," Norbert had said to Baron Altenstein. "So far as I know, I'm the only man who has ever seen his wife."

The Baron, who cultivated a somewhat coarse taste in irony, repeated this to his friend.

"No wonder they're not surprised you don't lead a bride to the altar, Marcus! Ha! ha! ha! Norbert has let 'em know why!"

But it was nearly three years since Hart had first loomed on the London world. Various myrmidons before and since had been working in America and elsewhere with the object of restoring him to the position where new domestic ties are legitimately attainable.

With a clever wife what might not he become? He had just received a letter from his agent in New York announcing the fact that, under certain conditions, and at a price which even Hart thought extravagant, the woman he had married twenty-five years before was prepared to take the necessary measures to set him free. This was his second reason for the luncheon party. The occasion seemed a fitting one for the confession he was meditating.

After coffee had been served, therefore, and the animation of his guests had been succeeded by the pensive calm which descends on most of us after eating as much as is good for us, Marcus disclosed his secret. Assuming his frankest manner and most serious tone, he asked them to give him all their sympathy and help, because he had something very difficult to say!

Remembering there were the diamonds to be paid for, they feared that he might propose something unpleasant.

It was Mrs. Chesterfield, of whom most was expected, who replied. Of course he could rely on their sympathy and help!

"Thanks, dear ladies," he said. "The sympathy is for the past, the help for the future. You all know something of my unfortunate married life."

They admitted that his troubles were not unknown.

"So many young men make mistakes of that kind," murmured Lady Horham encouragingly.

Hart inclined his bald head.

"Sometimes the strongest men are the weakest in that," added Mrs. Chesterfield with flattering intent.

"It's plain you don't believe the stories you've been told about me," resumed Hart, "or you wouldn't be here."

"Of course we shouldn't!" exclaimed Mrs. Kington, conscious of a sudden desire to giggle.

She had heard such tales!

"I happen to know that Captain Norbert brought back some to London," Hart went on. "I fear it never occurred to him to tell the truth, which is that I'm more sinned against than sinning."

The ladies sighed faintly in collective sympathy, as though listening to "an ancient tale of wrong."

"Our sex, I suppose, isn't always in the right," murmured Mrs. Kington, a little nervously, under the oppression of Hart's shining black eyes.

"It is the old story, as you perceive," he continued, "the story of a foolish youth and a designing woman, his inferior in social position and education!"

He really believed that.

"Quite the most dangerous kind of mistake," said Lady Horham.

"Quite!" assented Hart. "My wife, however, refused me the justice which she owed. My nature is weak and kindly. I avoided harsh measures—and I—well, I admit it—made the best of the poor sort of freedom I was allowed."

"Was there no remedy?" asked Mrs. Field, conscious of a domestic problem which on such evidence she couldn't solve.

He shook his head. "Not then," he said, "but things have changed. Something has occurred on the other side which will shortly set me free on this. I shall—as early as the end of next week—be able to lift up my head again and meet women on what I may call a footing of equality!"

"I see," broke in Mrs. Kington quickly. "You can marry again if you want to."

Again Marcus bowed his bald head impressively.

"Yes," said he. "I shall be restored to that happy band."

"And this," said Mrs. Chesterfield, "was what you wanted to tell us."

"Yes," said Hart. "People will have to know. I

cannot go about the world proclaiming it. It's a subject I can hardly touch on—I mean with acquaintances likely to misunderstand me. But with you ladies it is different. You can put my case before your friends with all the delicate sympathy of your charming sex."

"Vulgar wretch!" thought Mrs. Kingston.

"Of course we will all do our best for you, Mr. Hart!" said Mrs. Chesterfield.

The others murmured assent.

"Thanks, dear ladies!" said he. "Now, I hope we've done with this painful subject for ever."

Soon after they left him, much impressed with what they had heard. Lady Horham and Mrs. Chesterfield drove off together.

"He means to marry again," said Lady Horham.

"Yes," replied her friend, "and we're to make it known."

"Do you think there's any one in his eye?" asked Lady Horham.

"From what I know of the man I should say there was at least one," replied the other.

CHAPTER III

WHEN the Duchess of Evesham returned to London from the villa she had borrowed on the Riviera, on the unspoken understanding that the owners should be allowed to stay there for a fortnight, she was at first greatly annoyed to hear of Mr. Marcus Hart's election. The club of which she was the president was her pet scheme. It was her answer to the charge of frivolity brought against the set which she was popularly supposed to lead, and she desired to believe that it represented a serious effort to encourage a higher standard of intellectual life. Hart's election, however, had shaken her faith.

So far as she was aware, the only useful act of his life was the discovery of an American heiress to replace the Marquis of Gaintry's first wife. But this of itself she considered insufficient. What did it mean? Was it in any way connected with a change of opinion on the part of Emilia Arden? The day after her arrival in Grosvenor Square she sent for Miss Arden to ask why the man had been permitted to get in.

The duchess remembered that Marcus Hart was supposed to admire Emilia, whom he had met three years ago at Lord Gaintry's. The fact that he had a wife still living greatly impaired his social value as a millionaire.

Moreover, whenever, as often occurred, Mrs. Arden, her grace's cousin, was deploring a mother's difficulty in dealing with undowered daughters, Mr. Hart's name—probably as evidence of Emilia's powers of attraction—had loomed formidably over the horizon of the discussion.

"I don't discourage the man calling," Mrs. Arden

had said to her, less than three months ago, "in fact, I can't afford it, but Emilia is quite rude to him."

"He advised you about some investment, didn't he?" the duchess had asked.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Arden, "he told me when to sell out, and for the first time in my life I made £2000."

Remembering this and other things concerning the redoubtable Mr. Hart, the duchess was passively resentful. Men of this sort had so many subterranean ways of corrupting society. She even felt some vague misgivings as to its future. Money entered in everywhere and brought a taint with it. Moreover, she was a little disappointed about Emilia, who ought to have found a husband before this; she was pretty enough, and clever enough—in fact, young men considered her dangerously clever—but so far, although certain names had been mentioned (including that of Lord Severnford), nothing had come of it. The chances of well-born portionless girls were getting worse and worse with all those rich young women of the middle classes thrusting themselves to the front!

The duchess was revolving such matters as these in her mind when Emilia, in obedience to her summons, appeared before her.

"Why on earth was that man elected, Emilia? It seems I can never leave London unless something foolish is done," said her grace.

"We did our best to keep him out," Emilia answered, "but he 'got at' the other four on the committee. We were out-voted. Captain Norbert was taken by surprise."

"A most discreditable thing to all concerned!" returned the duchess. "Who were the man's supporters?"

"Lady Horham, Mrs. Chesterfield, Mrs. Kington, and Mrs. Field."

"I am surprised at Mrs. Kington," said her grace.

"So were we," replied Emilia. "We thought she was on our side. She seems quite ashamed of herself now."

"And what was the nature of the bribe?" inquired the duchess.

"I'm not sure," said Emilia, "but I think Arthur Norbert knows now; he dined at Mrs. Kington's last night on purpose to find out."

"I will send for him then," said the duchess; "I want this business cleared up. I'm not at all sure that I ought to continue to be president. Ring the bell, please." Emilia obeyed.

The duchess told the man to telephone to Captain Norbert at his chambers in St. James's Street. If the captain was in, he was to come round to see her grace at once.

Norbert arrived with military precision in less than half-an-hour. He had expected the summons.

Norbert was generally regarded as a graceful failure who had missed his chance. He had left his regiment to become secretary to the Marquis of Gainsbury, who had held office in a discredited government. The crushing defeat of the party had taught Norbert that something is needed for success beside family interest. Since then he had contested two constituencies, but in both cases had been badly beaten. His simple methods of "yes" and "no," he said in excuse, were quite unsuited to the modern public life. It was his misfortune to be born with views of his own, but these were the last things that electors wanted. His elder brother, the baronet, the inheritor of an encumbered estate severely crippled by the Death Duties, could do little for him; consequently, Norbert was now compelled to live on a small income inherited from his mother. A popular, handsome and intelligent man of undisputed position usually finds little difficulty in marrying an heiress. For this, Norbert professed to lack the necessary predatory instincts. How far this self-denial might be due to Emilia Arden's influence, he at present forbore to seek. Emilia's brother, the hope of the family, now commanding in India the regiment in which Norbert had served for several years, was Norbert's greatest

friend. At school together, they passed out of Sandhurst at the same time and had been gazetted to the same regiment. Ever since he was a boy of fourteen he had known the Ardens intimately. Mrs. Arden and her late husband, the General, liked him. Whenever they wanted advice, which was not seldom, they consulted him. But in seeking his advice, Mrs. Arden had flashed on him, and constantly renewed the message she deemed necessary. Norbert read it. It meant that any love-making between him and Emilia would be a preposterous piece of folly and on his part a gross breach of trust. Emilia, on the other hand, had no distinct message to signal. She treated him as an old friend whose society pleased her. Hitherto he had accepted the unpretentious part of an amiable detrimental in a scheme of life from which passion, so far as the eye could see, had been obliterated, and in which "good" marriages represent the pivot on which the whole artificial and complex organization turns.

"Poor Arthur's weakness," said Mrs. Arden, "clever as he is, is to take life as a sort of joke. Few men can afford that."

But every time her mother said this, and she frequently repeated it, Emilia winced. When she had been a little girl, and Norbert a youth at Sandhurst, in spite of the disparity of their age, one of those rare but touching friendships that are never forgotten had grown up between them. The feeling that had come into existence then had undergone little change now. To Emilia there remained still something spiritual in it. He touched the vividest of her early memories. Her brother and Arthur Norbert had taught her to ride. To him she owed her excellence in games; he was associated with the happiest moments of her girlhood; he still filled a dominant space in her mind. With her, he was always gentle and kind, and she believed that she alone understood the fine qualities carefully concealed from others by his attitude as a cynical man of the world.

Memories and thoughts such as these lead to unprofitable musings on the part of young women brought up to regard a brilliant marriage as the main object of a scheme of life of which Emilia was already tiring. Emilia was easily bored. Her mother bored her, though she struggled against it. Most of the men she met bored her. Some she despised. Others, especially the pushing men who, after successful warfare in brilliant financial campaigns, pitch their camps in the social Capria which she inhabited, offended her. She resented the venal respect with which her set had welcomed Marcus Hart. Her resentment was not decreased by the fact that she knew the nature of the man's admiration for her. But at the same time she was beset with fears coming from other directions. To abandon the luxuries which had become necessities and sink into a pinched obscurity was the sinister prospect which she dreaded. Her skirts had sometimes brushed it and it made her shudder.

For the discontent, visible in the fatigue of her voice or the bleaker gleam in the brilliancy of her eyes, there was the eternal cause.

The moment Norbert entered the duchess's boudoir, he suspected that the two ladies had been busy talking of him in a key of regret. His imagination was quick enough to guess the criticisms commonly expressed behind his back. "What a pity he doesn't do something!" were the words he accepted as expressing them in a single phrase. Norbert thought it a pity himself, but he had been squeezed out of politics in two exasperating elections and could see no fresh fields on which to waste energies of which too much leisure had blunted the edge. He consoled himself for his passivity by the thought that he was "looking on with some interest." This he believed as useful an occupation as wrestling in the crowd for unattainable prizes. In secret, however, he was profoundly discontented. The impact of such blatant prosperity as that of which Marcus Hart was at that moment the most formidable exponent, increased this angry bu

well-concealed sense of bitterness. He knew he was envious of what was contemptible.

"Sit down and tell me all about it, Captain Norbert," said the duchess, after the first greeting.

"The vulture has been gnawing at my liver ever since that man's election," he answered. "You see in me a defeated man. The committee conspired in secret and rejected the secretary's advice."

"I don't think what has occurred is in the least amusing, Captain Norbert," returned the duchess. "I've just been considering whether I ought to resign."

"And admit defeat?" replied Norbert. "I've a much better plan than that."

"It seems to me too late for plans," said the duchess. "But tell me first what the bribe was. The world's growing horribly corrupt! I was afraid at one time that the horrid man had 'got at' you and Emilia!"

"His Magnificence didn't even try us with diamond brooches!"

The duchess frowned.

"It's worse," she said, "than I thought."

Norbert shook his head.

"There are," he said, "excuses. The ladies all have husbands to support and cannot afford to be proud. They felt it would have been prudish to pretend 'they couldn't accept expensive presents from a gentleman' when given collectively! Mrs. Kingston considers it an act of ordinary courtesy."

"I'm glad she can reconcile it with her conscience," said the duchess.

"She'd do that easily enough!" said Miss Arden.

"But the diamonds weren't all," resumed Norbert. "He told them a startling piece of news besides. The discreditable lady who has so far hampered Mr. Hart's career has been got rid of! The liberated husband can now hold up his head again as a man seeking another wife."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed the duchess, conscious against her will of a certain shifting in the centre of gravity balancing her disapproval.

"Yes," said Norbert, "and the news has already caused a flutter in"—he paused a moment and, glancing at Emilia, added—"many places."

The girl coloured, conscious too of the changed situation.

"Since we've swallowed Marcus and found him more formidable than we anticipated," Norbert continued after a pause, "we must assimilate him as best we can. Why not make him treasurer?"

"Because we've no treasury," said Miss Arden.

"But his name would make it sound so full," returned Norbert. "It might provide him, too, with an opportunity of cultivating his hidden virtues."

"I don't think that, perhaps, after all, I need resign," observed the duchess, who was not listening.

"Other magnates have endowed two hemispheres with free libraries," continued Norbert, following his train of thought. "Comforted by a capitalist, the Enlighteners might be made a permanent centre for cultivating the joys of the intellect."

"That's nonsense!" exclaimed the duchess, suddenly aroused from her reflections by Norbert's mockery. "Please be serious. I suppose, after all, there is something we can teach Mr. Hart. The very fact that he was so anxious to join the club is something in his favour. I can see no reason why he shouldn't be asked to be treasurer. It's true we've no money, but some one might leave us some. Everything must have a beginning, and rich people of the middle classes make some most extraordinary wills! In any case we can draw the line at Mr. Hart. It's right that all sorts of cleverness should be represented among 'The Enlighteners,' and the man's extraordinary financial talents are quite worthy of respect. The only thing is, that he ought not to have been elected without my being consulted. When and where's our next meeting, Captain Norbert?"

The secretary informed her that it was in her own house. Professor Blake, author of *New Horizons*, was to open the debate.

"It has occurred to me," continued Norbert, "that it would be an excellent opportunity to expose Mr. Hart to the full blaze of our ideas."

"What do you mean?" asked the duchess.

"The subject of the professor's lecture is 'The Simple Life.' Why not invite the new member to take the chair?"

The duchess, remembering there were jokes which it was best not to see, did not smile, but merely observed that it was right Mr. Hart should know something of their ideals.

"In the discussion afterwards there's no reason why he shouldn't pick up a good many of them," said Norbert.

Then he asked the duchess whether she would allow him to invite Mr. Hart to preside. So long as the discussion was conducted in a serious spirit, her grace could see no objection.

"I'll answer for the spirit," said Norbert. "It's for Friday, the 27th—ten days from this. I'll call on Mr. Hart at once."

In the afternoon, therefore, he conveyed the duchess's invitation to the new member. He found Hart smoking a big cigar in his library, an imposing apartment enriched with impressive book-shelves and watched over by a decayed man-of-letters who also acted as the owner's private secretary.

"As I look round on this collection of wisdom," Norbert began, "I feel you're just the man we want."

"In the club—what?" asked Hart behind a grin of victory. "Glad you want me, after all!"

"Exactly," said Norbert. "I admit that I was opposed to your election. There are only five men on the list. Three of them are famous foreigners, the fourth a British Administrator in the Colonies. I'm the fifth. You're the sixth."

"Strikes me," said Hart, "that you've had it all your own way so far."

"That's it. You're right. Jealous? Of course I'm jealous! Probably the first man in Paradise didn't

welcome the second. I've been, well—a sort of chamberlain. Now I've got you to help me. You shall be the black man in a turban with a drawn scimitar. You shall stand at the portals and keep the other fellows out!”

For a moment Mr. Hart almost looked the part suggested for him. His bushy brows descended till they seemed to touch his bushier moustache. Then he smiled. “Hardly the sort of joke the ladies would like, I take it—what!” he answered.

The two men exchanged a look. Norbert felt that he was increasing the other man's dislike of him, which did not displease him.

“Figures of speech are dangerous to unwary men like myself,” continued Norbert cheerfully, after a rather ugly pause, “but never mind that. I was sent to you on business by the Duchess of Evesham. The club meets at her house in Grosvenor Square on Friday, the 27th—you'll receive formal notice. Professor Blake is to lecture, the lecture is to be followed as usual by a debate, and the duchess wants you to take the chair.”

Hart's vanity thrilled, his anger was appeased. The Duchess of Evesham had recognized his existence.

“But I haven't the honour to know her grace—at least personally,” he said.

“I'm to introduce you before the meeting,” Norbert replied. “I rather thought that she wanted me to take the chair, but it seems (although she was much too kind to suggest it) that I'm too frivolous for them. You see the thing's generally regarded as a compliment, and the duchess thought it would be a graceful act to give the latest recruit the first chance.”

“Awfully sweet of her grace—what!” replied Hart in his smartest manner. “What's the chairman supposed to do?”

“Introduce the lecturer, pay him a few compliments, and say something pretty at the end of the debate flattering to us all round.”

"But I don't know anything about Professor—what's-his-name," said Hart.

"Blake. He's no end of a clever fellow. Those who know what it means call him a sociologist. But you'll find all about him in 'Who's Who.'"

Hart threw the end of his cigar into the fire-place, rose from his arm-chair, and consulted the catalogue of his books.

"Yes, here it is," he said. "Professor Blake, *New Horizons*, *The Modern Taint*. I see—I've all his books. I'll get my man to find all about him for me."

"Your valet?"

"No, my librarian."

"Of course, how stupid of me! What a pull you have!" said Norbert. "I wish I could afford a guide to knowledge!"

"I've been too busy to waste my time on cheap information," said Hart, nodding at his books.

"Of course. Your man will tell in ten minutes a good deal more about the professor than you need ever remember."

"What's the lecture about?" asked Hart.

"'The Simple Life.' The duchess is quite sure you'll find something fresh to say about that."

"What the deuce is the simple life?" Hart asked.

"The sort of thing we all of us think so good for other people."

"I see," said Hart. "A sort of peep at perfection—what? I'm not supposed to agree with the lecturer, am I?"

"The club would prefer you didn't. Nothing gives them more pleasure than to see a practical man of the world roll out a philosopher brim-full of theories. Evidently that was in the duchess's head when she sent me over to invite you to take the chair. We may rely on you, then?"

"Yes," said Hart. "I'll do my best. At any rate I won't bore you with long speeches."

"That's it! I see you grasp the idea. The duchess will be pleased. But I must be off."

"Have a cigar?" said Hart, opening a great cabinet.

"No, not now, thank you," said Norbert, who had risen from his chair. "I've a call to make. By the bye, I hear you are to be congratulated."

"What about?" growled Hart.

"Something Mrs. Kington called your 'restored freedom.' As a bachelor, of course I've no right to offer an opinion on its value, but the ladies seemed pleased."

"It's all over the place then? I mean my divorce," said Hart.

"Naturally, since you were good enough to start it on its round. The duchess says it puts things on quite another footing. Good-bye! See you in Grosvenor Square on the 27th."

Then with a quick nod, but without shaking hands, Norbert left the room briskly.

"Ta-ta, my boy," said Hart, ringing the bell.

But when the door closed he scowled after his visitor.

"That's not the footing I intend to be on with him, damn his impudence," he muttered, "supercilious beast!"

Then he sat down and began to bite his nails thoughtfully.

What did Norbert mean? Of course, it meant that he was jealous. "Why," said Marcus to himself, "the chap couldn't get twelve dollars a week as a clerk in New York!" This thought consoled him.

"He fancies I don't understand his game yet," he further reflected. "He'll have to learn that I play it by my own rules."

Talk about good breeding too! It was an infernal piece of bad taste on Norbert's part to refer to this divorce. When Americans had complained of the insufferable manners of "Society people" in England Hart had always "stood up" for what he chose to consider his class, but it was pretty clear they had some excuse! Class? After all, what was class now-

a-days? The only distinctions he recognized were money and power. Master Arthur Norbert would have to learn this, and Marcus Hart was the right man to teach him the lesson.

There was one thing pretty clear: this fellow must be put in his place. Marcus had never had a tussle yet without coming out "top dog!" "I'm the black man at the door, am I?" he muttered aloud. "Norbert had better take care it isn't slammed in his face!"

Meanwhile the object of Mr. Hart's angry reflections was crossing the Park in the east wind on his way to Sloane Street, where the Ardens had a flat. He was disappointed to find that Emilia had not returned from Grosvenor Square, and had no desire to see her mother alone, conscious, as he was, that she was beginning to watch him a little suspiciously. He disliked intensely to see her yielding to the pressure of "Marcus's millions," so began by telling her of the duchess's annoyance at Hart's election, and of the punitive trap laid for him. To be pulled up by Mrs. Arden did not improve his apparently unruffled temper.

"I think you are making a great mistake in teasing Mr. Hart," she said, "and I should be much obliged if you would not laugh at him before Emilia!"

"You mean having swallowed him that we ought to digest him as though the process were pleasant?" he replied.

"I mean that I'm most anxious not to quarrel with Mr. Hart."

"She has heard," he thought.

"Mr. Hart," resumed Mrs. Arden, "has no pretence to be a man of birth, but he is a man of action who will go far. He is still young, and will easily repair the—ch—mistake of his youth."

"He'll have dozens of chances!" assented Norbert maliciously.

"Besides, as you're so constantly here," continued Mrs. Arden, ignoring the gibe, "and are sure to meet him, it would be tiresome to find you two sparring. Will you have some more tea?"

"No thank you."

"I particularly want Emilia to be nice to him. If she hears you sneering about 'his magnificence' and all that sort of thing she will be prejudiced. No young woman can possibly respect the man she has been taught to laugh at. Mr. Hart—by some timely and generous advice—as you know, enabled me to make 2,000*l*. Now, Arthur, you know what 2,000*l*. means to a poor woman. I confess I'm grateful!"

Mrs. Arden's discovery of this debt of gratitude was very sudden. The day before yesterday she had accepted it as "what that sort of man is made for!"

Here was further cause for unpleasant reflection.

Hart's ugly head now seemed the dominant feature in Norbert's horizon. It was hopeless to pull down the blinds and pretend that you couldn't see it because vulgarity, wealth and effrontery ought to make it invisible! Still it was useless to argue with the lady in her present mood.

"You will be careful, won't you, Arthur?" she resumed earnestly. "I dislike saying unpleasant things, but you could help me a good deal if you would."

"Of course Hart is Hart," he said, "and what the newspapers call a 'modern force,' which means that he can buy what he wants, and help his friends in the way they want!"

"Quite so," she replied; "and if we are willing, he is anxious to be our friend."

Norbert departed in a more resentful state of mind than he had come. He had some skill in discerning the face of the sky. Mrs. Arden had given him warning.

CHAPTER IV

NORBERT had not yet admitted the real cause of the exasperation which Hart caused him. The actual nature of the sentiment was too unflattering. But after his conversation with Mrs. Arden it had become clearer and uglier. There are conclusions at which we instinctively shy, and this was one of them. Hart was among the group of richest men in England. Norbert also thought him one of the least scrupulous. He was now bent on displaying himself as a prize match in the marriage markets. Already the dealers were on the alert. Of the dream Mrs. Arden was dreaming Norbert perceived the meaning. As a prospective bridegroom the man's vast wealth more than compensated for a reputation for financial rapacity in regions unsurveyed by women. For a career blotched in other respects the women would make a point of pitying him. Few of them would be prepared to reject him either as a son-in-law or a husband. This might be a repugnant fact, but it was one custom and precedent had taught him to regard as inevitable in a world organized on principles which permitted such men to climb to the top. Sentimental theories always yielded to the pressure in practice. The question, therefore, was this. Was he justified in warning Emilia Arden against what was gathering in the mind of her mother, because it existed in Hart's? Would it really be a calamity to marry him? In marriages of that kind the bride was so carefully protected by settlements that the risks incurred were entirely moral. These, so far as Norbert could see, women generally accepted with a light heart.

But Emilia seemed a being less grossly constituted ;

nor could he think of Marcus Hart with his low bald forehead, black brows and rolling oriental eyes making love to her without a feeling of intense repulsion. Why, he wondered in a sort of dumb rage, did not her mother feel this too?

Since it had become known that Hart was able to marry again, Norbert had not failed to observe the change in the attitude of the women. He had suspected it in the duchess. It had startled him in Mrs. Arden. • At the same time what had made the man the object of greater interest to them, had changed Norbert's amused but contemptuous dislike into a feeling of positive hostility.

The man at first, merely an offensive type, had become a formidable danger to the ideals which had grown up in his mind around Emilia Arden as the slow increment of sixteen years' friendship. It had never occurred to Norbert that he might marry her himself. She had been a child of six when he had been a lad at Sandhurst. Since then he had gone through many vicissitudes of sex adventure. Marriage had hitherto seemed to him outside the probabilities of the life which he need consider. But "this black man" and Emilia! The thought was intolerable. What was Mrs. Arden thinking of? What was the duchess thinking of? Why could not they see with his eyes, or he with theirs? And with what eyes would Emilia herself look on this sinister prospect?

Yesterday Mrs. Kington had told him that Marcus was quite infatuated with Emilia! Then, perhaps suspecting his anger, to annoy him further she had insisted on the domestic qualities latent in "that sort of man." However they might plunder the public (not that she believed Marcus had done that!) they made excellent husbands and fathers.

"Fancy Hart as a husband and father!" Norbert had replied. "He's only fit to be door-keeper in a——"

"In a what?" Mrs. Kington asked curiously, as he smothered the word.

"In the department where Eastern potentates guard their domestic bliss!"

"I'll tell him," she had said mischievously.

"He knows already," Norbert had answered. "I told him."

And Mrs. Kingston's eyes and too red lips had grown round with pleased surprise.

But within the last twenty-four hours the idea he most loathed had become still more distinct and hideous.

Norbert began to feel as one who, hunting a dangerous monster, finds himself incapable of devising any pitfall out of which the subtle beast cannot easily clamber.

On leaving Sloane Street he returned to his chambers, where, contrary to his custom, he dined. At nine o'clock he called on Professor Blake, whose evenings were often spent at a notable club in Piccadilly. Here he was lucky enough to find him, and offered him the Duchess of Evesham's flattering message as an excuse for his intrusion.

"I understood," said Blake, "that the duchess would take the chair herself."

Then Norbert explained that her grace had a serious object in view.

"You've heard of Marcus Hart?" he said.

"The millionaire, the ha'penny papers used to call the 'Oloptic King'?" inquired the professor. "The fellow who has got himself elected to the duchess's *Salon*, the what's it's name—the Enlighteners."

"That's the man. Now, professor, the duchess wants your help in administering a corrective. Hart got in against her wishes whilst she was on the Riviera, and it has occurred to her that, if he took the chair, he might learn something to his advantage—that is if you refuse to temper the winds of your criticism to this blatant unshorn ram."

"Hart, I suppose, knows the subject of my lecture," said the professor, "and the risks he runs?"

"He's unconscious there are any."

"But the man knows my views about predatory finance and the evils he represents?"

Norbert shook his head. The professor's vanity was up in arms.

"What? Doesn't he know my *New Horizons* or *The Modern Taint*? I hoped few rich rascals had escaped them. Why, I'm to lecture next autumn in the United States on 'Waste, Wickedness and Wall Street Wealth'—the title isn't mine, but my agent's."

"Hart had never heard of you, although all your books are in his library!"

"Body of Bacchus!" exclaimed the professor, who was fond of strange oaths, with kindling wrath.

"That's all the better," replied Norbert. "As it is he merely regards you as one of the harmless 'intellectuals' to whose words duchesses love to listen. He respects you accordingly, and is prepared to patronize you with all the knowledge of your work discovered in *Who's Who*."

"The brazen beast!" exclaimed the professor.

"But what a revenge!" replied Norbert. "It will be a sort of moral vivisection. The scapegoat, after patting the executioner on the back, will do splendid expiatory service. I'll post you to-night some remarkable press-cuttings culled from the New York papers."

"It's a trick then?" asked the professor.

"It's a public duty," replied Norbert.

The arrival of an amiable metaphysician to play billiards with the professor interrupted the discussion; Norbert left them chalking their cues, the professor having promised "to bait the rascal as much as he dared."

The day after Norbert called on Mrs. Arden Mr. Marcus Hart displayed himself in that lady's drawing-room, where he learnt that the duchess had taken Emilia with her into the country. Hart had assumed his jovial manner—a manner intended to express breezy innocence in spite of astounding worldly

success. This was his first social reconnaissance. He had an extraordinarily cunning eye for values, and desired to see how much his recovered "freedom" had raised him in the estimates of motherly appraisers.

Mrs. Arden was still a handsome widow who admitted fifty years. Hart inferred that she fully realized that his solicitude for her family was not excited by the lingering attractions of which she plainly made the most. Still "a chap could never be sure with these modern women" who lasted wonderfully, thanks to careful diet and a little artificial aid cleverly applied. It would be good business, therefore, he thought, to make the thing clear to her.

"Well, I am disappointed!" he exclaimed with this object.

"The duchess takes Emilia away with her a good deal, Mr. Hart," replied Mrs. Arden. "She's my cousin, you know, and Emilia, of course, makes herself useful."

Mr. Hart paused a moment. His thoughts went back to Maida Vale. But here he was in close touch with a duchess!

"Of course; she's so accomplished," he said. "Quite a boon for a man like myself to be allowed to enjoy her society, although she doesn't jump much at the chance, eh? What?" Hart laughed as much like a jolly and careless sportsman as he could. The mimicry was passable.

"Emilia is really rather shy, only we never dare tell her so," replied Mrs. Arden, with an air of gentle impartiality; "we always say that she never rushes people. She's so different to most modern girls in that. But I must say (although perhaps I oughtn't) that there isn't a young woman in London with a more sensible head on her shoulders. Emilia is practical to a fault!"

"I heard her say that she can't stand bores or fools," said Marcus. "I said to her for a joke, 'in which list d'you stick me, Miss Arden?'"

Mrs. Arden smiled benignantly.

"It isn't safe to tease her," she answered, "as we find to our cost at home. But what did the child say?"

"Oh, she said she must leave me to find out, and that if I couldn't decide I might assume I wasn't in either. Had me there! What? Ha! ha! ha!"

"I'm afraid she's dreadfully disrespectful, Mr. Hart," said the lady with an air of simple motherly pride. "But do have a cigarette! I smoke with my intimates, although I'm dead against the habit in other women. So if you hear me deny the vice you mustn't give me away."

She handed Hart a cigarette-case left at home by her son when last in England. He lit the cigarette, inhaled the smoke, discovered the inferior quality of the tobacco, and inferred that the whole business was an effort on her part to "get on a footing," as he inwardly called it.

"We're both for the same junction then!" he thought to himself. "This is a woman of business!"

Then suddenly changing his manner for a more serious key, he said: "Mrs. Arden, this is a very malicious world!"

"Isn't it?" returned the lady, keeping her cigarette alight by gently blowing through it.

"Now, if I call here often, Mrs. Arden—I mean when your daughter's at home—there's sure to be talk, and perhaps you wouldn't like it. But you've always been most kind to me, and between friends—and, dear lady, I hope you'll number me among yours!—there's nothing like frankness. As a man of honour, therefore, I feel bound to tell you to your face that I admire your daughter more than any lady I know, and that, if I ask your friendship, it is not entirely from an unselfish motive. If, then, you object to me, tell me so, like a true-hearted woman dealing with an honest and simple man, and I'll take good care that I never bother you or Miss Arden again."

Mrs. Arden flung her cigarette away. The pace rather astonished her as well as the manner of making it. She decided to see as much of his meaning as discretion suggested.

"You have spoken generously and very kindly, Mr. Hart," she answered, "and I'm grateful. Of course what you have said must go no further. I have no pretension to know what Emilia thinks. You touch on things which she must manage as she likes. We are a modern—a dangerously modern family. We do as we like and respect each other's reticences. At the same time for myself I welcome your offer of friendship in the sincerest and frankest spirit. I believe—I dare say you'll think it foolish of me—but I do believe in destiny. What must come, will be! And it is my simple way to leave 'whatever gods there be' to manage these things as they and my daughter may decide."

Mrs. Arden, conscious of the obscurity of her theology, hid behind it with a vague sense of comfort.

"And I," replied Hart sturdily, "I believe in destiny too. Why, where should I be without it?"

It did not occur to either of them that he might still be in Whitechapel.

"I'm glad to hear you say so," Mrs. Arden replied; "men have so little belief now-a-days!"

"Eh? What? Quite so," replied Mr. Hart, recovering his light tone. "I've no particular sympathy with the—what-you-may-call-'em—modern scepticism."

He was sitting in the same chair as that in which she had reproved Arthur Norbert yesterday. The recollection quickened her curiosity. She knew what Arthur thought of Hart; what did Hart think of Arthur? So she began her attack.

"Arthur Norbert, who called here yesterday, tells me you're going to take the chair at the duchess's when Professor Blake lectures. I'm not a member of the club. Emilia wouldn't let them elect me even

if they wanted to, but perhaps my cousin may invite me. The professor's views are a little eccentric, but then the club, as I tell the duchess, encourages that sort of thing."

"Yes," Hart replied, "the duchess sent Captain Norbert to ask me to take the chair, but he gave the message in such a devil-me-care way that I should have declined the honour if I hadn't known my man."

"Poor Arthur!" returned Mrs. Arden. "He is so well-meaning, too, but I must say his manner is a little *insouciant*."

"Ain't there an English word for it—what?" asked Mr. Hart.

"Not impertinent, surely, Mr. Hart?"

"Some people might choose the word, my dear lady. The truth is the young gentleman's annoyed with me. He tried to keep me out of the club. He induced Miss Arden to vote against me. Of course I don't mind. I'm a man of the world—of a far tougher world than that in which our young friend graduated, and I can make allowances. If I'd been in his place I dare say I should have acted in the same way; in fact, I told him I should. Only in that case he wouldn't have known I tried."

"Of course Arthur is jealous. We all know that. But there are excuses. He has very little money, and missed his chance in politics. It has been his fate, from no fault of his own, always to be on the losing side. Now, Mr. Hart, you've won. Arthur cannot admire other men's success. He has seen you carrying everything before you, and, such is human nature, that I'm afraid it's quite possible that he is envious. Nothing is so ugly as envy; it colours our simplest acts. I could not help seeing yesterday—what I'm saying is entirely between ourselves, Mr. Hart—that he was annoyed because the duchess wanted you to take the chair. I even went so far as to reprove him for it. We've known him intimately ever since he was a little boy. He played with

Emilia when she was a baby. He's more than an old friend. He's a sort of chartered libertine in the family, who says and does just what he likes."

"But why, dear lady, don't you keep him in his right place?" asked Hart.

"He's my boy's greatest friend," replied Mrs. Arden. "It was he who told Arthur 'to look after us' when he last went out to India. The poor dear fellow is constantly under the delusion that we are in danger of being devoured by the wolves!"

"Norbert classes me among the wolves," said Mr. Hart.

"No. He's afraid we are going to enlist a bigger and a stronger lion in our service. Mr. Hart," replied the lady playfully. "But *au fond*—under his careless, cynical manner; I mean—Arthur is the soul of honour. As it is he respects you in spite of himself. I'm most anxious you and he should get on, as you're sure to meet here a good deal, and I'm convinced, Mr. Hart, you'll meet him more than half way."

"Of course I will, dear lady," he replied, drawing his own conclusions from what he had heard.

Soon after that he left. Before the lift shot him down to the hall it seemed to him that he was standing on new ground. Already the other fellow was beginning to be pushed out, and Marcus hadn't yet applied his weight! Evidently the mother wouldn't allow Norbert to stand in the way. He had quite taken her measure—all sugar at top but stubborn enough below—quite capable of driving a bargain!

The girl was what he wanted—under the shadow of a duchess too!—and he meant to marry her. The very fact that Norbert was trying to bar his way added to the zest of his attack.

"I'm the black man at the gate, am I!" he thought. "I'll take good care to slam it in his confounded face!"

There was, indeed, a good deal which the word "love" in its widest as well as in its most primitive meaning does not cover, stirring in Mr. Hart's breast as he buttoned his fur coat round his sturdy body and rolled into the motor brougham waiting at the door.

CHAPTER V

THE lecture and debate was expected with pleasurable excitement by most members of the Enlighteners. Mrs. Arden alone—and she was not a member—anticipated it with apprehension, for other reasons than that she had small sense of humour. The experiment seemed a ridiculous one. When Emilia came home she merely said that Mr. Hart had called and “been very nice.” The nature of his “niceness” she decided not to disclose. It hurried her off, however, to consult the duchess, who preferred Emilia to her mother. Mrs. Arden had been compelled by “limited means” to exercise so much foresight that the practise of circumspection had penetrated her nature till it had become a sort of new but necessary instinct. As the duchess said, Emily (Mrs. Arden’s name was Emily) was constantly making provisions against what was not worth providing against. Under this aspect of her character she found her cousin somewhat a bore. But in the problem which Mrs. Arden now presented to her for solution she at once recognized the necessity of caution.

“The man is immensely rich, and a clever girl like Emilia might easily manage him, but if I were you I should tell her exactly what he told you,” observed the duchess.

But Mrs. Arden demurred. The thing wasn’t as simple as it looked.

“You mean she doesn’t like him?” said the duchess.

“It isn’t so bad as that,” replied Mrs. Arden. “I think she will become accustomed to him. He has

lent us a magnificent motor-car. Emilia, poor child, is constantly grumbling because we can't afford one. Things dawn on girls in this way, you know."

The duchess reflected. The suggestion annoyed her somewhat, possibly because there was too much truth in it.

"I'm afraid Emilia does dislike him," she said. "The man isn't attractive."

"Not in the common-place way, perhaps," protested Mrs. Arden, "but there's a latent sense of power about him that grows on one."

"Arthur Norbert calls him the 'Black Man at the Gate,'" returned the duchess. "I always seem to see him in a turban and yellow slippers turned up at the toes."

"Yes—Arthur Norbert!" murmured Mrs. Arden with a sigh.

"Well, you can't expect Arthur to admire him," said the duchess.

"But we might expect him to conceal his aversion," returned her cousin. "I have had to speak to him. Mr. Hart complained—in a manner."

"In what manner?" asked the duchess abruptly.

"He merely hinted that Arthur tried to keep him out of the club, and made Emilia vote against him. The poor man's feelings were hurt."

"Poor dear!" observed the duchess.

"Unless I felt sure Emilia would be quite happy I shouldn't worry about it; I'm not ambitious," Mrs. Arden continued.

"None of us are," said the duchess derisively. "But in any case whatever you do, or, for the matter of that, whatever the man does, Emilia will do just what she likes."

"I know," replied Mrs. Arden submissively, "that's why I want you to advise her."

"At once?" asked the duchess.

"No; when the thing has ripened a little."

"'Ripened!' What a horrid word," said the duchess.

"Is it? but I'm so flustered," said Mrs. Arden apologetically. "But then there's another point, this practical joke, I mean."

"Professor Blakr's lecture?" inquired the duchess.

"Yes. I'm afraid it may be carried too far. Arthur Norbert is so mischievous."

"Let us hope it may clear the atmosphere," replied the duchess. "If the professor's abstruse we shan't understand what he's driving at. Philosophy is never personal. We all believe in the temptation and dangers of riches for other people."

"Can't you give him a hint?" asked Mrs. Arden.

"I'll see," answered the duchess.

"Arthur Norbert looks on the lecture as a trap to make Mr. Hart look foolish," urged Mrs. Arden. "To me it seems quite spiteful."

"I'll think it over," said the duchess.

And this was all that Mrs. Arden could extract from her cousin. On the other hand she left Grosvenor Square with an invitation to be present at the lecture—a compliment including the right to speak in the debate.

But having thought it over the duchess decided to ignore the trap, having persuaded herself that the man was much too thick-skinned to feel a rebuff, even if he suspected that it had been designed. In any case it was unlikely to deter him from the purpose which Mrs. Arden attributed to him. The duchess contented herself, therefore, with hinting to Captain Norbert, whom she saw the day before the lecture, that it would be well "not to carry the thing too far." Norbert told her that the range of the joke would be strictly limited by the professor's natural want of appreciation for dramatic effects.

"He does mean mischief, then," said the duchess.

"He's angry because 'His Magnificence' has never heard of him," replied Norbert. "But I think it will be all right."

"That's a little vague, isn't it?" protested her grace.

"I mean that there are few caps that our chairman is likely to fit on his illustrious head," Norbert replied.

Having taken these mild precautionary measures to satisfy a caution which the interest of her own family had aroused, the duchess secretly prepared to enjoy the fun.

With the exception of a few "Enlighteners" down with influenza, the whole club flocked to the duchess's drawing-room for Professor Blake's lecture; only the little group who formed the inner circle alone suspected the mischief which was behind it. The great room, famous for a ceiling painted by that master of allegorical art, Francis Sardon, was crowded with brilliant and rustling ladies. Round the duchess were gathered a distinguished group of guests, the Bishop of Burley, the popular and eloquent divine, whose modernized views of Christianity had done so much to strengthen the Church on its political side; Sir Roland Hodge, who had devoted vast scientific attainments to prove the immortality of the soul, and the eternal verities of religion from a few analogies selected from certain popular facts associated with the imperishability of matter. This eminent man was the hope of all those whom Haeckel and his followers had frightened. His name was rarely out of the columns of the most widely-read papers. As the Bishop of Burley had said, "Sir Roland's powerful mind, and his vast insight into the obscurities veiling the origins of life, had brought comfort to many." Sir Roland and the bishop constantly met on the same platform, and were known to scoffers as "Castor and Pollux, or the twin brethren of Creed and Science." Near these lights was an eminent soldier who had failed in politics because of his extreme honesty; and other gentlemen whose names decorated most fashionable gatherings bent on the encouragement of culture for the upper classes. The professor, seated next to his chairman, to whom the duchess had introduced him in her most agreeable manner, took stock of his audience and

admitted that it was worthy of him. It is true that he neither respected Hodge nor the bishop, still each had in the world a place which lent great weight to their patronage. They were, in fact, bigger men than himself. As he looked round, he was conscious of Marcus Hart breathing a little heavily against the nape of his neck.

Mrs. Arden, whom modesty had not permitted to seek a place amid the eminent people about the duchess, had found a seat in the middle of the second row between Mrs. Chesterfield and Mrs. Kington. She had exchanged almost affectionate greeting with Mr. Hart. She longed, she said, to hear him speak; hoped he would not allow the professor to be too deep, but would remind him that some of his audierfce were quite unenlightened women.

Marcus had replied that his man had "knocked together a few things for him," but that Mrs. Arden might be quite sure that he wouldn't bore her. "After all," he said modestly, "he wasn't the man in the pulpit, but the little boy in the organ-loft who blew the bellows."

Both Mr. Hart and Mrs. Arden were conscious that Emilia and Captain Norbert were at the further end of the room, Emilia in the last chair on the left in the last row, Norbert standing behind her. They were laughing and talking. Mrs. Arden knew that Mr. Hart was watching them. She was annoyed with that helpless sort of annoyance which is not the least exasperating; she was also uneasy lest her friend the chairman should be humiliated. Her hope was that the man's cleverness had provided against this. Probably he had ascertained what the professor intended to say. "He isn't," reflected Mrs. Arden, "the sort of man to put his head into a trap."

"Marcus is going to begin," murmured Mrs. Kington. "What fun!"

The rustling and murmurings ceased as Mr. Hart stood up, a sheet of note-paper in his hand. "My lords, ladies and gentlemen."

He spoke with a sort of guttural lisp which he attributed to a gouty affection of the throat. His s's were but half-sibilants, his m's and n's obscured by their bias in the direction of d's.

"The alphabet with the cramp!" whispered Norbert to Miss Arden.

"Hush!" said she. "I've caught his eye."

Then the chairman introduced the lecturer. They all, he said, knew the professor's record at least as well as himself. They had all read his delightful *New Horizons* and gathered moral encouragement from *The Modern Taint*. As to the professor's views on wealth it was not for him to say much. It was a point on which many opinions were held. Until human societies were readjusted on a fresh economic basis, and of this there was at present no sign (here Mrs. Arden began to see the work of Marcus's "man") the rich man—even the plutocrat must be tolerated. But as it was, the death duties were hitting him hard, and what we regarded as wealth, represented possessions in a constantly fluid state. Moreover, whatever might be said of wealth, and however philosophers might despise it, they must remember that it was a thing which most men and a few women sought. (Here a rustle and smile passed over the audience, and Mrs. Arden hoped that her look of encouraging sympathy reached the chairman.) After this sally in a humorous direction, and after thanking the professor in anticipation for what he (the chairman) was persuaded would be a most interesting discourse and one leading no doubt to an improving discussion, Mr. Hart sat down with the full sense of having discharged his duties in an entirely dignified and satisfactory manner. The audience applauded.

Then the professor rose to his feet. He first thanked Mr. Hart for a most flattering introduction. "Our chairman has shown," he said, "an acquaintance with my work which encourages me to believe that neither my *New Horizons* nor *The Modern Taint* has been written quite in vain." At this dig, Hart

shuffled his feet. Some of the audience smiled. Mrs. Arden's uneasiness increased. There was only one slight objection, the lecturer resumed, which he would venture to make. The chairman had suggested that philosophers despised wealth. Now this was incorrect. They did not despise wealth, but they despised the uses to which it was usually put, and deplored the methods by which it had been too frequently acquired. But above all, on the highest moral grounds, they resented the esteem in which its possessors were held by a certain vulgar, greedy, but withal inefficient section of the community. "Fortunately," added the lecturer, with a pleasant smile, "with those people none of us here have any sympathy. I look, indeed, to influences such as that of the Enlighteners' Club to supply a remedy for the evil. Only, ladies and gentlemen, we must be patient. Many false gods must be destroyed; many gilded idols cast down before this consummation is attained. Meanwhile we must do our utmost. The example of a simple life is in the reach of us all, and we have the encouragement and support of all the doctrines of Christianity on our side."

The bishop nodded his head approvingly; the chairman's black brows bristled whilst his lips smiled; the duchess's eyelids quivered faintly; Mrs. Kington whispered maliciously to her neighbour, Mrs. Chesterfield, "I shall end in selling my little owl and giving the proceeds to the Salvation Army."

Mrs. Chesterfield frowned; the professor resumed. As he plunged into the impersonal side of the matter, the attention of the audience relaxed as his display of wisdom deepened. He detailed how barbarism, struggling towards order, produced feudalism, how feudalism slowly dissolved as the other elements of society became massed against it, till, in course of time we had been brought face to face with what some observers already regarded as a serious menace to human moral progress. He meant the danger of the mean ideals begotten by the complicated commercial

system out of which predatory finance had sprung. "This evil," he added, "has not yet attained its full dimensions."

Here the audience became alert again.

"Yes," said the lecturer, shaking his head mournfully, "society as it is now constituted affords an almost untrammelled field for the exploits of predatory finance."

A number of ladies scribbled "predatory finance" on their tablets lest they should forget the phrase.

Then suddenly a clear voice asked, "What is predatory finance?" and Mrs. Arden, with a nervous pang, recognized her daughter's.

Interest deepened as the lecturer replied: "I will explain by a little story told me by a friend with the view to assist me in the course of lectures which I have been requested to give in the United States on 'Waste, Wickedness, and Wall Street Wealth.' The title," added the lecturer modestly, "is not mine, but my agent's."

"I wish Mr. Hart wouldn't look so purple," whispered Mrs. Kington to her neighbour; "it makes me quite uncomfortable."

"I call it impudence!" Mrs. Chesterfield replied, remembering the diamond brooch and her gratitude.

"I thought it was irony," murmured Mrs. Kington; "the thing they say women can never understand."

But the professor was telling his story. "There was once," he said, "a group of financiers who had not yet attained to the dignity of capitalists. A financier in his predatory shape," he explained, "was an expert who treated the money with which he expected the credulity of the public to entrust him, as though it were already in his possession. He had learnt, in fact, to coin gold out of false promises. These clever gentlemen between them," he continued, "controlled a bank and an insurance company, each of which lent money to the other whenever it was necessary to gull investors with the aid of the actuaries. These assets were, in fact, a stage army."

The lecturer glanced at his notes; the chairman pulled at his big moustache, which had apparently approached nearer his bushy brows.

"I don't understand," murmured Mrs. Kingston to her neighbour, "but it sounds odd."

"It's scandalous," said Mrs. Chesterfield.

"Emilia must be mad to bring this on us," reflected the perturbed Mrs. Arden.

But the lecturer, in an even, unmoved voice, went on with his story. The audience learnt how a worthless group of mines was acquired and a company formed. Next, a number of corrupt journalists were bribed with a percentage on the anticipated booty. It was erroneously understood, thanks to certain newspapers, that the bank and the insurance company protected the interests of the shareholders. Blinded by this delusion, and lured on by the shouts of the journalists, there was a rush for the shares, and on the top of the boom, very dexterously and quietly, "our predatory friends," as the professor called them, sold out. They made, he said, hundreds of thousands. When, in due course, the crash came, it was discovered that they had escaped with their plunder to repeat this simple manoeuvre on the next favourable opportunity.

The lecturer had described a well-known incident in the history of the Oloptic Trust. Mr. Hart was breathing heavily behind his back, and he felt that his shot had hit the target.

After this, the professor's plea for "the simple life" fell rather flat. The audience had heard it all before. It was, they felt, a waste of time to praise the simple virtues when the cost of clothing was prohibitive. The lecture, therefore, ended a little flatly. The *coup de théâtre* had been inserted in the wrong place. When, however, Marcus Hart was seen on his feet, the waning dramatic interest rekindled in a little burst of applause.

The chairman began by apologizing for intervening between the lecturer and any lady or gentleman who

might wish to say something on the topic they were considering. Personally he felt that he had learnt much from the professor's plea for the simple life. Still he feared that the discontent of those compelled by necessity to lead it, might prevent others from plunging too recklessly into the delights so graphically depicted. The chairman's "man," so far, had selected his phrases in wise anticipation.

"Very neat indeed," murmured Mrs. Chesterfield, as Mr. Hart sat down a little suddenly. "He behaved splendidly. Persecution, I call it."

"Surely not," whispered Mrs. Kington, who knew better; "'but philosophers step in where fools forbear to tread.' I hope I've got the quotation right!"

"The man is furious!" thought Mrs. Arden apprehensively. "I'll never forgive Arthur Norbert for playing such a trick."

"The Oloptic Leviathan has the professor's harpoon in his hide!" whispered Captain Norbert to Emilia Arden.

But at the whispered request of the duchess to throw oil on the troubled water, the bishop rose and scattered handfuls of healing platitudes, flattering alike to the lecturer and chairman. He believed we were slowly progressing towards a simpler life; at the same time their chairman's retort, that those whom necessity compelled to lead it enjoyed it reluctantly, was not without point. Next, Sir Roland Hodge, as a man of science, discussed the question. It depended on our ideals, he said. Love of barbaric splendour, apart from increased physical comfort, lingered as an atavism in the human race. He provoked some mirth by an audacious comparison between the time devoted to their toilet by the modern women of fashion and that which the Masai warriors lavished on their persons before proceeding on the war-path. Still he believed that human development, by increasing the sense of responsibility in man, would end in producing a society, animated by a noble austerity both of manners and purpose,

and based on dignity of thought and unselfish reasonableness in action.

Next, Mrs. Field, who prided herself on her speaking in spite of a slight lisp, "ventured a word." She feared that the society which Sir Roland depicted would be "a little dull and grey, uncoloured by any of those amiable weaknesses which now made the world so pleasant a place (for her sex at least) to live in." Other ladies following, the thread was soon lost and the discussion languished.

Then, after a pause, the chairman again rose to his feet. The debate, he said, had been extremely interesting. It was the first of the kind at which he had been privileged to be present. He was sure they were all grateful to Professor Blake. Speaking for himself, he was extremely grateful. As a man of affairs, however, he had not been quite able to accept his dicta as the final word. He was referring to what the professor had said concerning some methods of doing business. Here he differed with him. In all departments of life where men competed it was the efficient that came out on the top. Some men come out on the top in science, others in religion, others in finance. Those who were pushed aside generally complained of being defeated unfairly. As one who had some experience as an honest wrestler in the arena where he had gathered both kicks and ha'pence (the chairman was now displaying his genial manner) he must ask them to believe that the professor was speaking from imperfect knowledge. A swimmer in an unknown sea had as much right to blame the currents which he cannot stem, as the ignorant dabbler who loses his head and his money in the ebb and flow of modern finance to attribute his failure to other men's dishonesty. There might be such a thing as predatory finance, but, so far, the chairman had not met it. If it did exist it must land those who practised it in the Old Bailey or the workhouse. Honesty, he assured them, was as essential to success in business as morals were necessary to success in

society. In fact, if he might follow the lead given by Sir Roland Hodge, he would venture to say that the increasing sense of co-operative responsibility had already almost eliminated fraud from the higher branches of finance. The assumption that the men who won were greedy cheats had been adopted by a lenient world to gratify the vanity of the untrained amateurs who lost. "At least," added the chairman, smiling repulsively, "those are my humble views. Eh! What?" he exclaimed, turning suddenly to the man who had victimized him.

"And very becoming views, too, Mr. Hart," replied the philosopher, "especially if you are smarting from the pin-pricks of chance!"

The meeting broke up. The audience found their way, in little chattering groups, to the adjoining rooms, where tea was served.

Marcus was congratulated on general grounds by his friends, on his "defence" by Norbert, on his dialectic powers by the Bishop of Burley, on his "grip of the subject" by Sir Rowland Hodge, on his splendid self-control by Mrs. Arden. Emilia said nothing and kept out of his way.

But Marcus, although mortified, was not deceived. He knew that he had been baited, and determined not to forget it.

CHAPTER VI

CUNNING after strength, on the malevolent side, is anger's most effective ally. Hart was both cunning and vindictive, and believed that he had been abominably ill-used. All the laws of what he regarded as hospitality had been outraged. Under the guise of a compliment he had been led into a trap: "guyed," as he called it in his savage communions with himself, before the whole club and in the eyes of the duchess.

Who was the enemy who had done this thing? But for Professor Blake's muddled account of a well-known trick in Oloptic finance, he might have passed over the affair as a piece of clumsy bad taste on the part of "a beggarly schoolmaster"; but now there could be no doubt that he had been purposely victimized. Moreover, he felt that the audience perceived this as clearly as he did himself. His reputation had been butchered to make a holiday for a pack of impertinent women, and a little group of supercilious men. Of course, a few cheap anodynes had been applied. The duchess had been graciously apologetic. She had complimented him on his spirited reply, spoken of Blake as a hot-headed Socialist with a reputation for fanaticism to keep up. The lecture, she considered, had been quite spoilt by the bewildering "predatory finance nonsense" which she had been unable to follow. She had further expressed a desire to introduce him to the duke, then in Scotland on business. He had left her quite satisfied that she was irresponsible. Further conversations with members of the club, however, by process of elimination, had persuaded him that Norbert was the moving spirit, Norbert had set the professor on him! Norbert

had supplied the ammunition for the attack. This he learnt by piecing together suggestions made by Mrs. Arden, Emilia Arden, Mrs. Kingston, Lady Chesterfield, Mr. Blake, and Norbert himself.

Norbert had politely hoped that he didn't consider "the thing personal"; apparently he, the professor, had been "ferreting about in the American papers for forgotten scandals." Mrs. Arden assured him that he had "done splendidly." She had never seen a man put more neatly in his place than the professor. The poor fellow had looked quite crestfallen! The obsequious Mrs. Chesterfield, without the slightest disguise, told him it was one of Arthur Norbert's tricks. Captain Norbert, in her opinion, was a danger to the club. Because he was a pet of the duchess he thought he could do as he liked. He never really took the club seriously, although the duchess couldn't see it. This wasn't by any means the first attempt. He thought it clever to "get at" people by means of a lecture followed by a debate. Once, when several of the most eminent actors had been invited to a club luncheon, he had "put up" Dr. Bevis Hope to make a speech deploring the lamentable state into which the British Stage had fallen for want of intelligent artists. No end of bad blood had been made in consequence.

Hart, too, had another reason for believing Norbert guilty.

Unless, as apparently had been arranged, some one had asked for an explanation of "predatory finance," the lecturer would have missed an opportunity. Hart, watching Miss Arden, had seen Norbert stoop and whisper to her just before she had flung out her challenge. It was here the venom had been injected. The blow had been struck at him with the help of the girl! This made the wrong unforgivable. Evidently they had conspired together. Marcus Hart had been held up to contempt and derision with the help of the young woman he was bent on marrying. Thus the sense of injury grew as its nature became clearer.

Wrath and desire revealed itself in a phrase: "Wait till I marry the young devil and I'll teach her!" He muttered the words aloud to himself as he lay back in his arm-chair on his return from Grosvenor Square, and looked through the smoke of his cigar at the beautiful nude figure of "A Dancing Girl" by a Spanish painter, capering insolently within the massive frame.

The picture soothed his anger for a moment. Marcus was "keen on nudes." He kept them, however, for his smoking-room, where he considered they created "a suitable atmosphere." There was a modern version of "The Rape of Lucrece," by a famous French painter, a "Nymph Bathing," by an equally illustrious colleague, and a "Venus and Adonis" treated pornographically but with extraordinarily technical skill, by Raekelbaum, the Belgian painter who had made a large fortune by variants of the same subject.

"When you marry again, Marcus," his friend Baron Altenstein had once said to him, "your wife will clear out the Raekelbaum, whatever she does with the other lot. But let me have first offer and I'll give you your price!"

For a moment, therefore, he admired the four notorious pictures with a momentary glow of satisfaction in their ownership. What was there he couldn't buy if he wanted it? Then, behind the background, the graceful figure and beautiful face of Emilia Arden presented itself to his imagination. "Why not?" he reflected, "the mother means business."

Emilia Arden had become a part of his scheme of acquisition. She must be added to his gallery of exquisite rareties, a possession less easy to obtain, no doubt, but the more ardently desired because of the nature of the obstacles. Norbert, in spite of his influence over the girl, dared not present himself openly as a rival. It had, in fact, become a problem to be worked out. Marcus was not the man to allow himself to be outbid in any market.

Not long after the lecture Hart was gratified and consoled by an invitation to dine in Grosvenor Square, conveyed in a genial note from the duchess. She wanted him to meet the duke, and to consult him about the future of the club. Marcus grinned. They couldn't afford to quarrel with him.

"Another of these rich ruffians," the duke had supposed. His grace, however, never failed to fit himself to his surroundings by a dignified acquiescence in their claims.

The duchess had explained that Mr. Hart admired Emilia Arden ; that it was time Emilia found a husband, and that every girl should have a chance.

"They'd give Bluecard a chance if he came to life again," the duke replied. His meaning was that he was not the sort of man to waste his time in pulling the ducal boat against the stream of circumstance. He was, moreover, a not incurious observer of what pedants called "social phenomena," and, as he pointed out (probably by way of an excuse), he "liked to see for himself."

So the Duke of Evesham shook hands with Marcus and expressed satisfaction at meeting him, and although the duchess, whom Mr. Hart took into dinner, forgot to consult him about the club, he had the gratification of meeting the Ardens under the roof of their august relatives.

The dinner, as his hostess remarked, was almost a family affair. Most of the guests were her own poor relations, but of this, at the moment, Marcus was not aware.

In the bland air of familiar aristocratic association Mr. Hart's pride swelled comfortably. He was not of those whom such breezes daunt. To him the honour came as the spoils of victory. The only concession he made was to forbear to talk of himself and his belongings. He watched the duke's manner and came to the conclusion that there was a simplicity about "the real aristocracy" which he might with advantage copy in the future. Nor was he unconscious

that his voice was loud and guttural when compared with his host's.

After dinner there was bridge for small points for those who wished to play. Marcus, an admirable player with a memory for the cards vouchsafed to few, cut in with Emilia, whom the game fascinated, but whose methods were erratic. Her partner's skill and insight won her reluctant admiration. He promised her "some games with some of the best players in London." She only wanted practice with first-class players to be "brilliant." Her mother looked on maternally, studying Hart's play with interest. Bridge, he told her between the deals, was like life. Those who made the best of their cards always came out on the top.

The games, which Hart and his partner won, having ended, Hart took an opportunity of playfully attacking Miss Arden for having exposed him to Professor Blake's artillery.

"Thanks to you," he said, "the professor fired his blunderbuss at me—what!"

"Predatory finance?" observed Emilia innocently. "I wanted to know, you know."

"The professor collected a lot of silly scandal from American papers and got it into his gun upside down, and let it off at me. It may have amused you, Miss Arden, but it taught you nothing."

"He seemed very much in earnest, didn't he?" replied Emilia evasively.

"I'm used to being shot at," said Marcus.

"It's the price one pays for being on the top, isn't it?" inquired Mrs. Arden, who was listening.

"We're the target for envy, hatred and malice," returned Marcus with an air of simple pride.

"They don't shoot at the duke—at least not much," Emilia remarked.

"But he was born on the top and—I got there; that is," added Marcus modestly, "if I really am there."

"Aren't you sure?" she asked.

"No," said he suddenly, turning his big shining eyes

on hers ; "if I dared, I'd ask you to decide for me. But good-night, Miss Arden, I must be off. I saw the duke smother a yawn. I can't tell you how much I enjoyed my bridge. I shall be dreadfully disappointed if we don't have no end of games together. Your game interested me extraordinarily."

Then Mr. Hart departed. The other guests soon followed him. The Ardens, as desired, lingered.

"How useful cards are!" murmured Mrs. Arden to her cousin. "Mr. Hart *can* play! Thanks to bridge, Emilia and he got on quite nicely."

"Certainly she didn't seem to dislike him quite so much to-night, Emily," replied the duchess.

Meanwhile, standing on the hearth-rug, the duke, in whom the sight of card-tables aroused a craving for sleep, was questioning Emilia.

"How d'you like Mr. Hart?" he asked.

"His bridge is wonderful," she replied.

"He's a wonderful man—in his way," observed the duke ; "a modern product people like you and me, my dear, can't afford to overlook."

"You might as well try to overlook the Achilles statue in the park," observed Miss Arden.

"Quite so," asserted the duke ; "but they are not dressed alike. Our friend is clad in all the spoils of the East. Try to encourage him, my dear!"

"To get more spoil?" she asked.

The duke laughed. "My dear," he said, "I'm told we live in an hungry age—'predatory' Mr. Hart tells me his critics call it—and, unless I've been taught augury in vain, the young women must be on the look-out for their share. Mr. Hart told me he could soon teach you to be a sound bridge player. Give him a fair chance, like a good girl."

The duke's thoughts again reverted to Bluebeard, but his philosophy banished the vision. We must all take what we can get—especially young women without fortunes.

Driving home, Mrs. Arden, who knew already, asked her daughter what the duke had said.

"That if I were wise, I would get Mr. Hart to improve my bridge," Emilia replied.

"Evidently he made a favourable impression in Grosvenor Square," observed Mrs. Arden. "I never saw Mr. Hart to greater advantage. The man has an excellent heart! How nicely he behaved when poor old Lady Hackitt muddled the game. He put back all the cards as they were and showed her how the hand ought to have been played. Most men are so pompous and conceited about their play. Nothing brings out a man's real character more than bridge."

"There's war, politics and finance, and a few other tests," replied Emilia, who saw very clearly where the current was bearing her, with all the approving help that her friends could give. The only thing wanted was the definite support of her own will. This was wanted. She could take the plunge whenever she liked, but the hand she tried not to feel, held her back.

What should she do? At present she decided to do nothing.

CHAPTER VII

ONE morning, soon after the duchess's dinner-party to her poor relations and Marcus Hart, Norbert met Emilia in the Row with Mrs. Tracy and Mrs. Mundsley, the members of the Club Committee who had helped her offer a futile opposition to the financier's election. Spring and warm sunshine was on the world. London was shining, beaming and basking in soft light, under a cloudless sky; the scent of wall-flowers was in the air. The thrushes were singing in the trees bursting into leaf, the wood-pigeons strutting in all their spring pride on the expanse of lawn stretching from the Achilles to the Wild Corner.

Mrs. Tracy and Mrs. Mundsley, school-fellows of Emilia, were both four years older than herself. Each had done what was expected of them. Each boasted of a wealthy and easy-going husband recently acquired. They were, therefore, qualified as young matrons to bestow counsel on Emilia whenever their sense of duty suggested the necessity of bestowing it.

The shadow of the possible marriage now looming above Emilia's horizon had naturally increased their interest.

"Of course she will have to get over her dislike for the man," Mrs. Tracy had observed to Mrs. Mundsley, whilst they were waiting for their friend to join them.

"If she can," replied Mrs. Mundsley, "and Captain Norbert will let her."

"I suspect the duchess has given him a hint, and I know Mrs. Arden has," replied Mrs. Tracy. "They both live in one of Mr. Hart's motors."

"Emilia and her mother?" inquired the other.

"Yes. And when one begins to accept favours on that kind—but here's Emilia. What a pretty hat!"

Mrs. Tracy admired it as she saw it approaching. They rose from their seats and went to meet Emilia, who had not yet seen them.

"I'm not surprised Mr. Hart's in love with her," observed Mrs. Mundsley, "those black men, you know, and that fresh, lovely type! He told Mrs. Kingston he thought her the most beautiful girl he had ever seen!"

"Shall you tell her?" asked her friend.

"I've told her already. She said I made her feel like the light of the Harem."

"What a horrid thing to say!" murmured Mrs. Mundsley.

"But she's worried about it."

"Why?"

"Captain Norbert, you know."

Then the three friends met, all with the same thought in their minds.

Emilia was still hesitating. The duke, the duchess, her mother, and Marcus Hart, "who was," as Mrs. Arden said, "ready to put anything at our disposal with the most delicate generosity," were all dragging her in the same direction, but the weakness enthroned in her heart held her back, and they were too wise to overdrive. But she was miserable and harassed secretly. Whether she fell asleep or awoke the same remembered voice was in her ears, and the same eyes watched her. Might not Marcus and his millions be made a safe haven for such humiliating storms of folly? But she knew there was no one to blame but herself. Arthur Norbert, with the rest of her friends, had taught her that her future security was attainable only in an opulent marriage. On this rock her world was founded.

But as Emilia, was revolving these tormenting thoughts in her mind, walking slowly in the sunshine under the green boughs with her friends, the man who was at once the disturbing element in her life and its

greatest joy was approaching from the direction of Knightsbridge.

Norbert was as discontented on his side as Emilia Arden on hers. He had been tempted to leave soldiering for politics. Luck and—he suspected—something else had been against him.

Norbert had met the Marquis of Gaintry at Simla, and been tempted to dash rashly into politics as the marquis's henchman. Of this he was now repenting. Like many men of his class, he had overrated the strength of the territorial magnates and overlooked the growing influence of the masses rapidly awakening to a sense of their political inheritance.

It galled him to know that in the world where things happen he was of no account. To be popular with a smart clique because he was personally agreeable to it as well as useful, afforded him no satisfaction. Disappointment lay on his shoulders like a burden placed there by his own want of purpose.

He might have drifted indolently on the seas of irrational flippancy where the idle rich and their followers, not without much foolish splashings, disport themselves, had not Marcus Hart steered his gaudy three-decker across these familiar waters. Something in Norbert's mind—acuteness of observation possibly fused by imagination—made this man, with all his crude egoism, coarseness and self-indulgent greed, clearly intelligible. He knew what Hart wanted and how he meant to obtain his object. This he was seeking by the usual means—60 h.p. motor-cars, opera-boxes, steam yachts, and other dazzling splendours, all placed at the lady's service. To oppose this there was nothing but the girl's physical and moral repugnance and his own influence over her. How should it be exercised? If he took counsel with the evangelists of the simple life, he would go to Emilia and say, "Don't sell yourself to the black man with the money-bags, but marry me. We can starve in the country instead." But then; as the poet says, "life is real," and the artificial com-

partment wherein Marcus, Emilia and himself had to play their parts, had rules which must be kept. Of these the chief one was that the rare things go to him who can pay the highest price. The black-browed millionaire had made his bid; Emilia's friends had accepted the offer, the girl herself had half acquiesced; Norbert had been told that he had no right in the auction-room. What was he to do? The wonder was that he should be in doubt.

As he reached the Row he was oppressed by the thought that he lived in a mean little world, peopled by a little mean people with mean ambitions, which the intrusion of monsters like Marcus Hart alone kept from stagnation. It existed for its own pleasure, was destitute of any serious national aims, but, fortunately for the State, its influence was waning. The broader streams of life flowing by it were scarcely conscious of its puny existence. Yet it was in this little world that he had gained his successes. But because he could not despise it without despising himself, his vague sense of resentment was the more embittered.

While Norbert was thus communing with himself, he glanced over the throng which he had just entered, saw Emilia and her two friends approaching, and suddenly became conscious that his decision had been made.

He joined the ladies and walked with them for a few minutes. At the end of the Row he and Emilia fell behind the others.

"How is His Magnificence?" he asked.

"Flourishing as usual," she replied.

"Has he forgiven us?"

"He has forgiven me," she replied.

"So I imagined. You and Mrs. Arden live in his motor."

"Not quite. But mother is devoted to motoring. We had a run yesterday to the end of Surrey and lunched at a place Mr. Hart has bought there. He has offered it to mother at what he called 'a nominal rent.' I'm afraid she means to accept it."

"Why shouldn't she?" he asked.

"Because," she replied, "there are limits."

"To the black man's splendour?"

"No; to our claims on his charity."

"That depends what you mean," said he.

"I don't know what I do mean," she answered.

They were both disturbed and constrained. Mrs. Tracy and Mrs. Mundsley stopped to speak with Mrs. Kington and her husband. The lady threw a curious glance after them as she returned Norbert's bow with a meaning smile. She regarded life as a drawing-room comedy, and suspected a plot involving these two.

"The sunshine brings them all out," said Norbert, "especially if they fancy that they have the right sort of clothes."

"Why don't you tell me what I ought to do?" asked Emilia abruptly.

The earnestness of her voice startled him.

"The duchess has given me a hint," he replied. "Your mother has given me instructions. I'm prejudiced against Mr. Hart and have no right to—discourage you, shall I say? But—forgive me for asking, Emilia—has he said anything yet?"

He looked at the girl, dreading her answer.

"No," she said, "but I think it's because he thinks it's better to wait. Am I to do what's expected of me?"

"Do what you want," he replied.

"But I don't know what I want. I want heaps of money. I want to help some of my people. I want most things greedy people want, but——"

She left the sentence unfinished.

"We're much alike in our wants," said he.

"You?" she questioned. "I always thought you were satisfied."

"Because I feed my vulture in private and don't whine?" he returned. "But the fowl has a horrid beak! It would be silly to go about the world confessing that I've muddled my life, that I left soldiering

for politics where I wasn't wanted, and that there is no use in me. Luckily I'm to be allowed another shot."

"How?" she asked, greatly interested.

"I've just been to see General Sir Charles Hardy," he answered. "I was his aide-de-camp in India. They are going to appoint a Commission to reform the system of Militia training. The General has offered me the post of secretary. The scheme's mainly in his hands. I happen to know German and was under Colonel Stuart in Berlin. By an extraordinary piece of good luck some dispatches I wrote were noted as 'meritorious.' They've no end of matter at the War Office that wants putting into shape before the Commission sits. The General has brought my name before the Secretary of War, and it has been approved of. I'm to write this afternoon, and I understand the thing will be done."

"I am glad!" exclaimed Emilia. "You'll be in London, of course."

"Yes, but there are a number of reports of the German General Staff, which I'm supposed to know all about, and I'm going down to Querl—the place won't let, worse luck—to read them up. I can't work in London."

"When will you be back?" Emilia asked nervously.

"In about six weeks. There are other reasons why it's better for me to be out of town just now. The duchess told me I was in the way. Your mother's afraid I may try to put you off—off this business, I mean, and there are things I prefer not to see. I share this weakness with the ostrich. But don't forget, Emilia, I am your oldest friend. You know why I daren't advise you over this?"

The girl had guessed, but he had never spoken about it before. It set her heart beating.

"I understand," she said, "and I'm grateful. You've always been good to me. That's why I bothered you—over this."

They had stopped near a bed of tulips beyond the

throng. The sun was warm, the shadows clear. The scent of the spring flowers had deepened in the balmy atmosphere. Norbert glanced over his shoulder and saw Mrs. Tracy and Mrs. Mundsley approaching, further behind them his keen eyes detected the dark face of Marcus Hart shining under a tall hat of excessive lustre. All the man touched seemed to shine.

"Here comes Hart," he said. "He hasn't seen you yet. Just one word more. If you find this business intolerable send for me. I will get you out of it."

"Thank you," she answered.

He saw the glow in her eyes, but looked away lest the interview should reach a plane of feeling which he longed, yet feared to enter. As he turned his eyes he saw two ladies stop Marcus Hart, who was glancing about him whilst he tried to listen with becoming interest.

Mrs. Mundsley and Mrs. Tracy joined them.

"We've just seen Mr. Hart," said the latter to Emilia. "He's looking for you. Mrs. Kington told him you were here. Shall I ask him to lunch?"

"No, please don't," said Emilia; "to-day's a holiday!"

"Cynical girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Mundsley.

Norbert looked back again; two other ladies had joined the group round Marcus. The others followed his gaze. "Where the carcass is?" he murmured.

The lustre of Mr. Hart's hat was now only visible, shining above a robust shoulder in white serge.

"That isn't fair to Emilia," said Mrs. Tracy.

"Don't be afraid; the eagles won't snap him up," observed Mrs. Mundsley.

Emilia remained impassive.

"Since I mustn't ask Mr. Hart to come back to lunch," said Mrs. Tracy roguishly, "perhaps Emilia will let me invite you, Captain Norbert."

But he excused himself. He had an engagement and must be off. He was leaving London to-morrow, and had things to settle.

"Our delightful secretary seems quite pensive, Emilia. What have you done to depress him?" asked Mrs. Tracy after Norbert was gone.

Emilia replied that the War Office had offered him an appointment. That of itself was enough to make a man thoughtful.

"Here comes Mr. Hart," said Mrs. Mundsley.

Having made his escape, the great man rolled up sturdily with the air of one whose coming is ever welcome. He observed that it was a "'rippin' mornin'," spoke of yesterday's "rippin' run," bragged of a new Mercedes car which he wanted Emilia to try, "one your mother will like, Miss Arden—as smooth as cream and runs a treat!"

When he left them at Stanhope Gate, where their ways parted, the air felt lighter. Marcus was just then bent on expressing himself as an oppressive copy of the rabbit-brained youths whose case of manner he admired. In this vein he reminded Emilia of "a coy boa-constrictor waiting to be fed." The ugly images the man's personality conjured up in her imagination were becoming the morbid manifestation of her disgust.

"Abuse him as much as you like," she said, remembering her friends' amiable practice, "never mind me!"

"Why should we?" replied Mrs. Tracy. "I'm beginning quite to like him."

"So am I," Mrs. Mundsley added; "there's much more in him than in any of the young men one meets."

"Ever so much!" Emilia agreed.

"Those sort of men make the best husbands for reasonable women," observed Mrs. Mundsley.

"Is that why you wanted to keep him out of the club?" asked Emilia.

"I did it because Captain Norbert made me," replied Mrs. Mundsley.

"I knew it was a mistake at the time," said Mrs. Tracy. "Billy said we were perfect idiots."

"Billy" was Mr. Tracy.

"Fortunately His Magnificence took it as a joke," observed Mrs. Mundsley, "as he could well afford to!"

Then they went to Mrs. Tracy's to lunch.

CHAPTER VIII

HART, without knowing it, applied what is commonly known as "the scientific method" to ascertain the real value of the place he had won in the world he had invaded. He studied, as it were, his social environment through a microscope. Where did he stand in the secret esteem of the men and women about him? What was concealed prevented his enjoyment of the respect revealed. Adulation was pleasant to his vanity, but, suspecting the presence of contempt behind it, his appetite was left unsatisfied. The Sultan had come to his throne, but was not sure that his most obedient subjects were not mocking him. As he often told himself in his self-communions, "they were all on the make." But the little world into which he had partly pushed himself and partly been lured, abounded in types which were new and depths which he could not fathom. Because of the novelty, this fascinated him. There existed among this people tribal conventions of which the meanings remained hidden, however sedulously he might mimic their worst manners. They had sprung from different soil to himself, and he envied them the fruit growing on their useless but, in his eyes, graceful branches. He knew that they wanted what he could give them, but his egoism, which had grown with his wealth, was dissatisfied with their price. In his own language, he wanted to know where he was, who were his friends, who his enemies? The only man who had persistently slighted him and almost openly objected to him was Norbert. In the struggle between them, although Hart believed that he had "come off best," not a few of Norbert's shafts had stuck, and the smart remained.

In compensation, however, he was conscious of real social progress. Norbert was giving way. What had happened was this.

Before he left London Norbert had written to the duchess, resigning the secretaryship of the club on the plea of "too much to do." But the real reason, of which Norbert made no secret, reached him through Mrs. Chesterfield. There wasn't, Norbert said, room in the fold for them both. Having swallowed the black man, they must make the best of him. The strange diet was evidently suited to the taste of most of the members, and he hoped it might satisfy their depraved tastes.

Norbert's comments reached Marcus Hart in much the same disrespectful terms that they were made.

The Duchess of Evesham, a woman of action, had now fully recognized the altered position. As a husband for Emilia, Marcus became a valuable family asset, and one to be honoured. Oblivious, therefore, of her change of front, she summoned the club to meet at her house, and proposed that the secretaryship should be offered to Mr. Hart on the grounds that he was a famous organizer whose efforts on their behalf could not fail to be crowned with success. Mrs. Chesterfield strongly seconded the proposal. Hitherto, she said, their affairs had been conducted in what she might without offence describe as a rather casual manner. To invite Mr. Hart to be secretary, she further believed, would be a graceful act of atonement for the unfortunate slight passed upon him at their last debate. She had, in fact, reason to know that his feelings had been deeply wounded. The proposal that "Mr. Hart be requested to act as Hon. Secretary of the Enlighteners' Club" was carried unanimously, no member daring to oppose the duchess and most of them being anxious not to offend Marcus. Mrs. Chesterfield, at her own suggestion, was requested to confer with him on the subject.

This was not the first time that Mrs. Chesterfield had had what Marcus described as "dealings" with

um. Her husband, Major-General Chesterfield, C.B., had unfortunately associated himself with certain public companies. To escape a growing burden, the Chesterfields had appealed to Mr. Hart for help, and Mrs. Chesterfield, a lady of extreme intelligence, had acted as her husband's agent. Mr. Hart had benevolently turned his attention to the General's affairs, and devised a scheme by which the General could escape from his financial entanglement by becoming indebted to his benefactor. Mr. Hart, at the same time, had put the Chesterfields on one or two "good things," thus enabling them to continue swimming in the same stream with people three or four times as well off as themselves. It was true the General desired "to get out of it and economize in the country," but to this his wife, who ruled the domestic camp, would not consent. Mr. Hart had said, "You stick to me, my dear lady, and I'll pull you through!" Thus gradually a compact had sprung up between them, in which it was agreed that the Chesterfields should enjoy the advantage of Mr. Hart's financial counsel in return for Mrs. Chesterfield's social advice.

"I want to know exactly where I stand, what things mean, and what people say about me," he had said. "I don't intend to be made a fool of, and I shall look to you to prevent it."

This blunt discussion, which had at first rather startled the lady, ended in deeply interesting her. It promised to invest her with the power she sought.

"You'll make it worth my while?" she asked boldly.

"That's it!" he replied; "you're a woman of business, and you can trust me."

Thus the Chesterfields' path was made smoother, and Marcus enabled to see with clearer eyes.

Armed, therefore, with the duchess's proposal, Mrs. Chesterfield begged Mr. Hart to come to see her. "The duchess wants you to be our secretary," she wrote. "The proposal was originally mine, and I am deputed to talk the matter over with you."

On the afternoon of the morning on which he received the note, therefore, Mr. Hart called on Mrs. Chesterfield.

The Chesterfields lived in a house much too big for them, near Kensington Gardens. Taken on a long lease, in a rash moment before his wife had acquired the protective experience which enables women to save their husbands from assuming burdens unaccompanied by increased social prestige, they could neither underlet it nor afford to leave it. It "bulked large" in the agent's books, but made the general groan inwardly whenever he let himself in at night with his latch key after an evening spent at his club.

"Over-housed," reflected Marcus, as he mounted the wide staircase to the drawing-room, "and over-wived."

Thanks to family interest, which was not small, the General had risen in the Service, until one of our small wars tested his military capacity. Unfortunately his efficiency did not endure the trial, and he was promptly relegated to the Retired List, and now saved himself the trouble of thinking for himself by accepting the leadership of his wife. Carrie, he told himself by way of excuse, was so devilishly clever!

Mrs. Chesterfield, on her side, was fond of her husband, whose martial appearance she admired, and whose easy-going nature never fretted her temperament. Cold-blooded critics described her as "a woman with a pleasing personality," but she still counted among her older acquaintances a few who ranked her with the beauties. She had straight but somewhat tired features, a tall imposing figure, and a manner of unfaltering amiability. Moreover it was generally conceded that she knew how to dress. Outwardly she faced the world with serenity, tempered by touches of becoming sensibility whenever sentiment seemed requisite. This was the outward woman. Inwardly she was the prey of many disappointments, due entirely to an income too inelastic to meet the claims of her vanity and her love of luxury.

She had commenced her acquaintance with Marcus

THE EIGHT GUESTS

Mart under the erroneous impression that she could "run him," only to discover that the reverse process ensued. At the same time, although she was made to feel the moral discomfort of "being in pawn" to her ally, she nevertheless found a certain distorted glee in mocking herself as "Marcus's Spy!" The situation seemed so original! To regard herself as the secret cause of his action was gratifying both to her vanity and her taste for intrigue. Proud of her subtlety, she delighted in what she called "problems." Marcus became a problem. Selfish herself, the vast egoism of the man, as it unrolled itself before her, filled her with amazement. There was something "abnormal," she told herself, in the workings of his mind! But although she regarded herself as a victim in order to ease her conscience, she soon discovered that she had a sting. She avenged herself by telling him the truth. "From the highest motive of friendship," she let him know "exactly what people were saying," sparing him neither their jeers nor their sneers. She had thus converted his dislike for Norbert into hatred, and constantly goaded his jealousy to sullen fury by suggesting that Emilia Arden was in love with his enemy.

Mrs. Chesterfield took her visitor downstairs to the General's study, gave him one of the General's cigars, and sat down on the other side of the fire. Marcus lolled back in a low arm-chair with his big feet on a level with his double chin, whilst, for a moment or two, she watched the flames shining in the lacquered leather of her benefactor's boots, conscious of her dislike.

The ogre sat by her hearth. She must feed him as best she could.

"About this secretaryship," Marcus began encouragingly, looking at her over his knee through the cigar-smoke; "it seems they're all coming round! It's a compliment, of course, but d'you happen to know what that chap Norbert thinks of it?"

"He told the duchess that he hadn't time for the

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work, but he told the others that, since the club had swallowed you, they had better make the best of you!"

Marcus uncrossed his legs, sat up and placed his big feet on the ground. Mrs. Chesterfield, with the gentlest look in her eyes, admired the effect of her shot.

"Wasn't that an odd thing to say?" she asked innocently.

"The chap's what-you-may-call-it—piqued, I take it," said Hart. "It's plain he knew the duchess intended to ask me to take the thing up, so put on side beforehand."

"No doubt," said Mrs. Chesterfield; "but Captain Norbert has been given an appointment at the War Office, so he had a good excuse for resigning."

"That's the first I've heard of the appointment," said Hart, whom the news displeased. "Another of their silly jobs, I'll be bound. Who got it him?"

"Captain Norbert was on Sir Charles Hardy's staff in India, and is supposed to do good work," replied Mrs. Chesterfield.

"I doubt it," said Mr. Hart. "What's the appointment worth?"

"Nothing very much, as things go, I'm afraid," replied the lady, "but it isn't purely complimentary."

"Well, I guess it isn't the sort of thing a man thinks of marrying on?" said Mr. Hart.

"Not unless the girl has money," she replied.

Hart reflected a moment. Apparently Norbert's trumpery appointment left the situation unchanged.

"What about this secretaryship?" he asked. "D'you think I ought to take it on?"

"Why not?" she asked.

"First they try to put me in a tight place," said Hart, "then they try the other thing."

"The fact is the idea really came from me, and I shall be disappointed if you don't accept it. So will the duchess."

"It's very good of you, Carrie."

"In their private talks Mrs. Chesterfield had

become "Carrie" to her friend, and was growing used to it.

"You see," she went on, "if you don't accept it people will talk."

"What can they say; come now?" questioned Marcus.

"Some will say it was never really offered, others will pretend that Captain Norbert did something to prevent it. The rest will believe you declined because you thought yourself unsuited."

"Humph!" grunted Marcus doubtfully. "I wonder what Miss Arden thinks?"

"Mrs. Tracy says she's furious."

Marcus rubbed his big knees. "What's she got to be furious about?" he asked.

"She regards it as a slight on Captain Norbert, I suppose."

"Look here, Carrie," exclaimed Marcus, rising from his chair and standing on his short legs before the fire, "let's understand each other. We're pals! I've done you and the General a good turn, and expect you to do me another in return. You know very well, my dear, that I ain't asking all I might ask, not, for the matter o' that, all I should like to ask."

Marcus leered. Mrs. Chesterfield dropt her eyes modestly. "You shall pay for this," she thought.

"As a matter of fact," he continued, "I ain't asking much. All you've to do is to let me know exactly where I stand. That's clear, I take it."

"Perfectly," she replied. "I'm to prevent you making a mistake—if I can."

"If I can?" repeated Marcus.

"Well! you are a man, aren't you?"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Marcus. "I see. Too much of the old Adam, my dear, what!"

"What I mean is this," she explained. "You have set your mind on marrying Emilia Arden, I think."

He nodded.

"You know Mrs. Arden wants to bring the match off and that the duchess encourages it?"

"Both as keen as mustard!" he assented.

"Only you are in doubt about Emilia?"

"Yes. It wouldn't be a gentlemanly act to rush things just now," replied Marcus; "at least that's what I feel."

"Exactly. You think it would be better to give her a chance of getting over her weakness for Arthur Norbert. Well, Marcus"—she brought out the 'Marcus' this time almost without an effort—"you are right. In spite of everything, Emilia might be tempted to say 'No' if you spoke too soon."

Mr. Hart grunted. "I never pretended the girl was in love with me," he said. "She hasn't had time."

"Of course she hasn't. But she'd marry you to-morrow if Captain Norbert advised her to. She goes to him for everything. Her friend Mrs. Tracy told me so."

Marcus writhed.

"I hate saying horrid things," continued Mrs. Chesterfield sweetly, "but you're a strong man, Marcus, and a brave one. You've been our friend, and I'm determined you shan't make a mistake if I can help it."

"What d'you mean?" he asked. "D'you want me to chuck it up?"

"I think it would be the wisest thing for you to do. There are heaps of other girls prettier than Emilia and quite as well born who would adore the ground you trod on if you would only look at them."

"No man knows that better than I do," said Marcus, "but I happen to want this one, and mean to have her."

"Well, you shall not say I didn't warn you," said she.

"What can Emilia Arden have against me?" he asked.

"Nothing personally. How could she? But she knows that the duchess and Mrs. Arden have told Captain Norbert to make himself scarce to make room for you. That's enough for a girl of her temperament."

"I'll bet a dollar Emilia sees the advantages of the marriage quite as clearly as her mother does," insisted Hart.

"That only increases your risks if you insist on marrying her," replied Mrs. Chesterfield.

"Risks be hanged!" exclaimed Marcus rudely. "I shall know how to deal with them."

Finding this avenue of attack closed, Mrs. Chesterfield sought another.

"There are things I feel I ought not to tell you, because it seems so cruel," she said gently, "but you are one of the few men who can face the truth, however painful."

"They teach you to do that where I come from," observed Mr. Hart grimly.

Mrs. Chesterfield shook her head and sighed. "No, Marcus, no," she said, "it's born in you. It is indeed. There are things a woman feels; this is one of them. If I wasn't sure of it I shouldn't dare to talk to you as I do. Nothing's easier than flattery."

"Out with it," said Marcus, "if it's about the girl."

"You've guessed," replied Mrs. Chesterfield. "Well, when the club decided to offer you the secretaryship, Emilia asked Captain Norbert whether she should resign. I had it from Emilia's greatest friend, Mrs. Tracy."

Marcus scowled.

Mrs. Chesterfield sighed.

"It's a horrid thing to have to tell you," she said, "but it will help you to understand how completely she is under his influence."

"She'd get over that nonsense if she married me," said Marcus savagely. "It's only a bit of sentimental rot from which all young women suffer."

Mrs. Chesterfield shook her head sadly.

"I wish I could think that," she answered, "but I can't. It's too deeply seated! Remember I'm telling you this from the highest motive. It would grieve me to see a friend to whom I'm so deeply indebted marry a girl whose will is controlled by another man!"

Mr. Hart's face grew blacker and blacker. Mrs. Chesterfield hastened to soothe him.

"My dear Marcus," she resumed, "you are one of the most fascinating men in London, but girls are weak and foolish, and this time you came too late on the field. I cannot, indeed, I will not, let you court disaster with your eyes shut."

"What sort of disaster?" asked Marcus.

"Domestic disaster!" she replied.

"Oh, that!" said he contemptuously.

But she knew that the poison had been instilled.

"You're a pretty lot!" he exclaimed.

"Ah! but don't blame us," she pleaded sentimentally. "Think how most of us have been brought up! A woman can no more control her affections than a man can."

"It isn't as though the chap wanted to marry her!" said Marcus, thinking aloud.

"He wants to marry her, only they've nothing to marry on! It's the most commonplace case—only Emilia Arden is not a commonplace girl."

But Mrs. Chesterfield heard the sound of her husband's voice in the hall. He was leaving his wife to play their game, but she was determined not to let him know how she was playing it.

"Hush!" she said. "Here's the General. Not a word before him about Emilia Arden. He would be furious with me if he knew what I had told you. But about the secretaryship. You will accept it, won't you? The duchess will never forgive me if you say no."

"Well, I suppose I'd better take it on since you're.

"I'll so keen," he said. "As for this other business, I'll think it over. Perhaps I'd better give the mother a hint."

He looked at her cunningly.

"For Heaven's sake, don't!" she exclaimed in some alarm. "Mrs. Arden's afraid of Emilia. Besides, if the girl were worried she's quite capable of making Captain Norbert marry her."

"But would he?" asked Mr. Hart.

"Certainly he would if he thought she really wanted him to. As it is I'm convinced he's only waiting for the hint."

Marcus muttered something indistinctly. She had made him see risks which before seemed shadowy improbabilities.

But at this point the General entered the room with an air of brisk satisfaction assumed at the door. He disliked Mr. Hart, but regarded him as an ugly force to be propitiated. His genial air represented a sacrifice.

"Ah, Herbert!" exclaimed Mrs. Chesterfield. "So glad you've come. I've just persuaded Mr. Hart to be our secretary. The duchess will be delighted."

"*Vice* Norbert resigned, eh?" said the General, shaking Hart's hand cordially. "But, my dear Hart, you're a brave man! I haven't the pluck to put my nose into the club. I'm afraid of blue-stockings!"

"I haven't seen the colour of their stockings yet," said Hart, "but I'm ready to risk it."

"You bold, bad man!" said the lady. "You see," she added, turning to her husband, "Mr. Hart is made of sterner stuff than you."

But the General, who had been reading the financial papers at his club, turned the conversation to the irritable state of the Stock markets, just then causing him some uneasiness. The topic led to regions whither Mrs. Chesterfield had no curiosity to follow it.

When Hart was gone her husband said to her,

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"Carrie, that beast means to have his pound of flesh."

"But he'll have to eat it with my sauce!" replied his wife.

She felt no small comfort in this.

CHAPTER IX

ALTHOUGH Marcus Hart was learning the lesson which Mrs. Chesterfield, not without malice, desired to teach him, his resolve to know "where he was" carried him to icy regions where the temperature of his self-complacency was painfully reduced, in spite of the flattering airs wafting him thither.

"I'm your intelligence department," said she, with pretty playfulness, "as the General calls it. As a strong man you'll know how to act."

Luckily for the lady, what Mr. Hart saw for himself made him believe that she was right. To Marcus life was a game in which all the greedy players were trying to win prizes. It was clear, therefore, that he must play his hand to frustrate theirs. Whilst the mother was trying "to shove him down the daughter's throat," as he put it to himself, the girl, on her side, showed little eagerness to swallow him. Mr. Hart regarded himself as a magnificent prize; consequently Emilia's reluctance lowered him in his own self-esteem. The attainment of this result was part of Mrs. Chesterfield's cherished "problem," and she watched his movements with the keenness of a spy. To Mrs. Arden he was respectful and lavish. The luxury he commanded was at her disposal. Step by step he overwhelmed her with obligations till, in her forecasts, she beheld him as a future son-in-law whom Emilia might easily mould into a fairly representative member of the glittering, vulgar society whose secret susceptibilities the gentleman still occasionally shocked. To Emilia Arden his manner was sturdily diffident. In his efforts to represent himself as a gallant admirer, respectfully awaiting the sign of

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encouragement from the lady, there were moments when he seemed almost modest. If Emilia expressed a wish, Mr. Hart ostentatiously struggled to fulfil it.

But the wooing was a fact which no one could fail to see. Emilia was marked out for the millionaire; Marcus's visible but unspoken claim gave her a sort of prestige of which she was conscious, but not ashamed.

"Why aren't they engaged?" wondered the General to his wife.

"I don't know," she replied, "unless it's a sort of passive resistance on the girl's part."

But, as is the case with many sly people, there was a distinctly sentimental side to Mrs. Chesterfield's nature. This the present situation brought out. She had admired and rather liked Emilia before Mr. Hart came upon the scene, now she sought her friendship with the unadmitted purpose of stiffening the other's resistance. They constantly met at the weekend parties arranged by Mr. Hart for the Ardens. Mrs. Arden had taken him to see Ilbert Grange, a charming place on the Thames near Goring. "It was," she said, "a delightful spot for a motor run from town." Marcus inspected it with a favourable eye, pronounced it "a nice little crib enough" and, as it was in the market, bought it after much haggling with the owner, for a third less than the price originally asked.

"How very clever of you!" said Mrs. Arden, with flattering approval, after a conversation which made it clear how neatly he had got the better of the needy vendor and his agents.

Marcus smiled his self-satisfied smile. Whatever happened, if he grew tired of it, he considered that the place would cut up capitally for building purposes.

Of this, however, Mrs. Chesterfield would not hear. Marcus was incapable of such vandalism! The delightful place, with the exquisite lawns sloping to the river, and the matchless old gardens must grow lovelier under Marcus's fostering care!

"I think," replied Marcus, modestly, "I may be trusted to make the best of it. Still a man who knows what he's about always keeps an eye on the future, dear lady!"

"Its future," gushed the flatterer, "is to remain in your family, Marcus, as a dream of Tudor gables and rose-gardens! Vulgar hands shall never touch the enchanted place!"

These flatteries Mrs. Arden heard without surprise. Few of her friends apparently could afford to forego Mr. Hart's patronage. She was satisfied to regard herself as first favourite and to invite to the Grange the acquaintances she deemed most useful. On his side Mr. Hart found the graceful and dexterous Mrs. Chesterfield an invaluable ally in spite of the unpleasant shocks the information she "gathered" gave to his pride. This lady's love of intrigue, in fact, was growing with what it fed on. Whilst Mrs. Arden was secretly comforting herself with the assurance that Mr. Hart couldn't be long in coming to the point now—a subject she feared to discuss with her daughter—Mrs. Chesterfield was cleverly keeping him back.

"Don't rush it, Marcus," she urged. "You'll make a big mistake if you do. I'm afraid she's corresponding with him."

"Him," of course, being Captain Norbert.

"What makes you think so?" asked Marcus gruffly.

"I hate tittle-tattle," she replied, knowing that her host did not. He pressed her, and at last learnt that Mrs. Kington had seen a letter in Captain Norbert's writing lying on Emilia's dressing-table. "Of course," she added, "it may mean nothing, but I think you ought to know."

"What's the chap keeping out of the way for if he likes her?" he asked.

"Oh, Marcus! you know as well as I do," his friend protested.

"Dashed if I do!" he replied rudely.

"To give Emilia her chance and not to stand in

her way. Suppose he were to frighten you off; what would they all say?"

Marcus frowned. "Frighten him indeed!"

"That ain't likely!" he said. "But it's pretty clear what I must do. I'll sound Emilia and find out for myself how far it's gone; she's humbugging her mother!"

"Do girls confide in their mothers?" exclaimed Mrs. Chesterfield.

"It's pretty plain this one don't," replied Marcus. "I'll try how far she's prepared to trust me."

Before he did so, however, Mrs. Chesterfield took a bold step and warned Emilia.

A chance occurred on the following morning. The Chesterfields, the Ardens, the Kingtons, Baron Altenstein, and a few other guests were staying at the Grange. The end of April had brought one of those genial surprises not uncommon in English springs. Mr. Hart, who had received a cablegram from America the night before, was busy with his shorthand writer in his study; General Chesterfield, Mr. Kington, and the baron were smoking on the lawn, reading the morning papers; of the rest of the guests some, including Mrs. Arden, had not yet graced the world by leaving the seclusion of their rooms; others were wandering about the gardens, or helping themselves to the strawberries flourishing a little reluctantly under glass. At breakfast, at which Mrs. Chesterfield and Emilia were the only ladies present, Emilia had expressed the wish to punt, and Marcus had sent an order to the boat-house.

"Take me with you, please!" Mrs. Chesterfield exclaimed, with that sympathetic eagerness of manner described by some of her friends as "affected," but which, nevertheless, as she well knew, was the main reason for her popularity; "you do punt so deliciously, and I do love seeing you."

"There are few things Miss Arden can't do deliciously when she tries," interjected Marcus gallantly. "But I'm having a neat little motor-boat

sent down next week, and that licks punting into fits. What?"

After breakfast, therefore, the two ladies went to the river, Emilia taking the pole, Mrs. Chesterfield the pillows.

The sun had now warmed the chill from the air; the punt drifted down stream, the thrushes sang in the trees; the meadows on either bank gleamed with flowers, and the whole innocent world seemed inviting the confidence which Mrs. Chesterfield sought. She approached it gradually, by gentle transitions, so that when the point was touched, Emilia Arden was unsurprised. Seeing something to be faced, and suspecting the other woman of no selfish purpose, she met her almost frankly. Moreover, the fact that Mrs. Chesterfield was admittedly ten years older than herself excused the part of counsellor in which she now for the first time offered herself.

Emilia turned the punt into a cluster of reeds near a sunny bank, and sat down opposite this intriguer on the war-path.

"You mean," she said, gathering the other's suggestions in a sheaf, "that Mr. Hart means to ask me why I'm hesitating."

"Yes," said her companion, "and I'm afraid Captain Norbert's name will be mentioned."

The colour mounted to the girl's face, stayed there a moment, then left it almost pale. She heard the finches in the bushes, the larks singing in the blue sky over the meadows, the rustle of the reeds against the punt prow, conscious all the time of a sense of narrowing in the spaces before her troubled mind.

"I felt they were all talking," she said resentfully.

"My dear girl! Of course they were! What could you expect? They look on it as arranged already, although of course, I know things haven't gone so far as most of them fancy. I thought if I gave you a hint that you might parry it."

Mrs. Chesterfield had picked her word.

Parry it! What was Emilia to parry? Looking as

deeply as she could into her own mind she could find no clear purpose there. The spring was stirring in her blood; she desired to forget Marcus's dark face and heavy ponderous jaws, but she had drifted so far that retreat now seemed more difficult than surrender.

Seeing the cloud on the girl's face, Mrs. Chesterfield pitied her. It pleased her to think of Emilia as a victim decked with ribbons and flowers to be sacrificed on Mr. Hart's greedy altars.

"I know it's dreadfully difficult for you, Emilia," she murmured sympathetically, "and I'm very, very sorry. I guess all you feel!"

"I don't want it to happen yet," said the girl miserably. "I want to be free a little longer, and then perhaps——"

But she paused abruptly.

"Perhaps what?" inquired the other, gently.

"O, nothing! It serves me right," she went on, "only—well—something might happen. What made you guess?"

"Guess what?" asked the cunning lady, uncertain what she had guessed.

"That I was trying to get all the fun out of it I could, and trying to believe it wasn't leading where it does!"

"I couldn't help seeing. Besides, I know Marcus. I'm afraid the idea has occurred to him too. That's what he means by saying he means to 'have it out.'"

"Well, I'd rather he came to me than went to my mother. It's humiliating to be a woman. We're trained to want things we can't do without, till greediness grows to a sort of meaner passion, and then some of us—the feeblest, I suppose—can't make up our minds to—to pay the price," she added.

Mrs. Chesterfield remembered hearing Arthur Norbert in similar words scoff at the trials of mundane souls; the echo deepened the dramatic interest of the moment by a slightly tragic infusion. The maid was to be handed over to the minotaur

because the lover would not raise a hand to rescue the devoted victim! She knew there were other aspects, but just then preferred this. But she had gone as far as she dared.

They sat in silence among the reeds. The sun rose higher in the blue sky, the buds slowly expanded in the soft air, but amid the spring stirrings Emilia for the first time consciously recognized herself as an artificial product of a false culture that had failed in its object. Her whole soul ached. She seemed cut off from love, less by instilled desire of wealth than by a dull and stupid code of heartless rules. Her world held her in by claims, by precedents, by the links in the chain of her own hesitating assent. The walls were closing; soon her capture would be complete. The long list of favours accepted with their accruing weight of obligation had already proclaimed her surrender; yet every day her aversion had grown more profound. Within was the world of her ugly thoughts, without, the paradise of spring and of the natural human craving.

But a distant bell chimed the hour, Emilia pushed the punt from its moorings among the river-weed, and, with a vigorous swish of the pole, turned up stream. From among her cushions Mrs. Chesterfield admired and envied the young woman, her youth, and splendid physical life. How odd it seemed! Emilia, reaching her goal, was dismayed by her victory.

Just when they were rustling the vegetation of a green bank, within reach of cowslips of pensive memories and gleaming king-cups, she made her boldest offer.

"Emilia," she said, "if you really want to get out of this business I'll help you all I can. Meanwhile I'll do my best to keep him quiet."

"Him" stood for the redoubtable Marcus dominating the horizon of both.

"That is, Emilia," she added, "if you are sure that you don't want to marry him."

"I'm sure of nothing except that I want to be let

alone for the present; and if he's wise he'll leave me alone!"

But from his study window overlooking the lawns, the river reach and the green country-side, beyond, Marcus watched their return. In his admiration for Emilia there already entered the sense of proprietary rights. He had made his bid and it had been accepted. What he mistook for honest domestic stirrings filled him. Every man of wealth and brains should found a family! What a mother for his children she would make! Marcus, whose origin was as obscure as that of a wayside mongrel, believed in breed. This cousin of a duchess had some of the best blood in England in her veins! How she would set the crown on his social success!

Then, as he saw the women reach the landing-stage and mount the gently sloping lawns to the house, his thoughts changed for a less flattering curve.

Carrie Chesterfield was right. It would be a mistake "to rush it." Still people considered the thing as good as settled. It was too late for the Ardens to turn back! Emilia wasn't the sort of girl to jump at a man. She was too proud for that. The girl had been brought up among a fairly fast lot, and had seen all sorts of things going on, but there was nothing of that about her. Hart was quite sure that there was one side of her nature not yet roused. Whilst this accounted for her coldness towards him (for much flattery had persuaded Marcus that he was pleasing to women) it made him easier in his mind "about that chap Norbert."

But his tranquillity did not last long. Just before lunch, impelled by sense of duty as usual, Mrs. Chesterfield fired another barbed dart into his vulgar complacency, having waylaid him in the hall for that amiable purpose.

"Emilia half-confided in me," she whispered hurriedly. "It seems she's frightened to go back and doubtful about going forward."

Hart looked black.

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"You don't spare a chap!" he growled.

"But, my dear Marcus, you are so brave, so different to most men in this. I'm beginning to see things and must tell you."

"You haven't been pumping the girl, have you?" he asked suspiciously.

"No, but I guessed she wanted to confide in me; that was why I asked her to take me."

"Well, what else did you discover?" he asked.

"It isn't quite easy to explain," returned the lady with earnest modesty. "But you are a man of the world and will understand. Emilia is one of those strange girls who shudder at the idea of marriage."

"Pooh!" he said contemptuously. "She'll soon outgrow that!"

"Moral and physical freedom is the watchword of that band, Marcus," said the cunning lady. "So be chivalrous. She will appreciate that."

With this hurried message Mrs. Chesterfield ran up-stairs to change her hat for lunch.

Before Marcus had recovered from this attack, Mrs. Arden caught him, as it were, at another exposed angle.

Emilia had had a delightful morning! Emilia was so fond of all physical exercise! Emilia had never had a day's illness in her life! She could walk twenty miles without the least fatigue! When Mrs. Arden looked round and saw the neurotic wrecks some women became before they were thirty, her gratitude was boundless. Sir Palmer Shovel, the famous specialist, who had known Emilia from a baby, had actually had the impudence to congratulate Mrs. Arden on being the mother of such a magnificent young animal! He was quite a coarse old man, and meant it for a compliment.

Mrs. Arden's excuse for this outburst was the discovery, made some time before, that Mr. Hart was a man with whom it was useless to "mince matters if you wanted to be understood," consequently her encouraging manifestation of maternal pride avoided all

attempts at this delicate moral operation. On the other hand, because her object was flattering to himself, Mr. Hart, who listened modestly, forgave Mrs. Arden for displaying wares for which, five minutes earlier, Carrie Chesterfield had suggested other values.

Mrs. Arden, in fact, was becoming harassed by what she called the "uncertainty," but she considered it wiser to "hurry up" Marcus than spur on Emilia. Already intimate friends had congratulated her, and it depressed her to be forced to admit that nothing had been arranged "yet." Moreover she was secretly anxious. She had had to reprove her daughter more than once for referring in an unguarded or cynical moment to Marcus as "the black man."

The slip, of course, was in execrable taste. At the same time, whenever she discussed the matter with her cousin, the duchess, who was naturally anxious for definite information, she admitted the necessity of giving Emilia "plenty of time." The man, she pointed out, was estimable and able, and no reasonable girl—and Emilia was eminently reasonable—could hold out against such generous devotion. It was true that Mr. Hart was not a hero of romance, but he would place the woman he married on a pedestal and—well—eclipse himself. This, she knew, was Mr. Hart's ambition. What more could a girl wish, or a mother desire for her daughter?

With such reflections as these the anxious lady comforted herself for her doubts, observing, not without apprehension, that the subject of Mr. Hart was one which Emilia avoided almost as carefully as she shirked the necessity of being alone with him.

CHAPTER X

WHEN the guests at the Grange gathered for tea in the hall, the acute Mrs. Chesterfield resumed her "problem" with deepening interest. Even the others, it seemed to her, were becoming conscious of what she called "an under-current." An element of restlessness floated on the atmosphere. Through the open doors the sunshine and garden scents entered on a stream of cheerful light, but the disturbance was scarcely associated with the stirrings of the spring. For there was a pursued and a pursuer in Mrs. Chesterfield's problem. She recalled how, in days before the election, Emilia had once described Mr. Hart as "like a blackbird looking at a worm after the first peck!" The aptness of the simile now vividly struck her. Emilia had mimicked the man's bird-like glare. It was pitiful to see her seeking refuge from it in feverish chatter with the Kingtons or Baron Altenstein.

But gradually it dawned on the watchful lady that there were other observers. She began to suspect that the baron suspected. Altenstein was Hart's oldest friend. Member of a famous banking firm in Eastern Europe, this astute member of the nobility of yesterday bred race-horses and experimented in stock-rearing. But the bushy moustaches brushed in the direction of his big ears concealed a mouth which contradicted an amiable manner. He was on Marcus's side, and Marcus knew it. The baron, moreover, was unmarried; rumour said because he had never found any woman lovely enough to be his bride, but a craving for ideal beauty in others had not saved him from

several attachments delicately described by Mrs. Chesterfield as "of a morganatic character."

"Marcus," said the baron, "your taste in—eh—sandwiches is worthy of the idealist you are, isn't it, Miss Arden?"

"I got my *chef* from le Club Amphytrion in Paris," replied Mr. Hart, "he sees my people learn their business."

But when the baron said "sandwiches" he turned his prominent blue eyes on Emilia, and Mrs. Chesterfield divined a certain meaning in their fishlike stare.

The observant lady, moreover perceived that Mrs. Arden was nervous by the way in which she talked gardening. Gardening was Mrs. Arden's subject; her host's horticultural treasures evoked a fervour which to Mrs. Chesterfield seemed a trifle strained. "Would you believe it, Emilia," she said, turning to her daughter, "Mr. Hart has a mimosa in the open in full flower!"

"Didn't know what a mimosa tree was like till your mother showed me, give you my word, Miss Arden," said Mr. Hart.

"Mimosa always reminds me of Monte Carlo," murmured Mrs. Kingston.

"Because they both begin with M?" inquired Emilia.

"No, because they flourish together," replied Mrs. Kingston.

"Horrid, vulgar place, Monte Carlo," said the General. "Decent women oughtn't to go there."

"They don't," said Mrs. Kingston.

Mr. Hart's lustrous bird-like gaze caught Emilia's limpid eyes.

"I don't believe mimosa will grow here in the open air," she said.

"Then see for yourself," said Mrs. Arden.

"Walked into the trap on purpose!" thought Mrs. Chesterfield.

"If you've finished tea, Miss Arden, I'll prove it to you!" said Mr. Hart. "Ocular demonstration! What?"

"What will you bet it's mimosa?" asked Mrs. Kington.

"Fifty to nothing on Mrs. Arden's authority!" said Marcus. "But come along, Miss Arden, you shall decide."

Then, having arrayed himself in a panama hat, Marcus conducted his guest to the disputed tree. The others watched them leave the hall in silence, because of the presence of Mrs. Arden, who informed them that mimosa (of which there were many varieties) really did grow in very protected places in England. But the minds of her listeners were as remote from botany as her own. "I fancy Marcus means to pull it off this time," reflected the baron. "A pretty mess he'll make of it! She'll lead him a nice dance, and serve him right too."

Meanwhile, Marcus and Emilia were crossing the garden to a spot where, between two greenhouses, a mimosa tree, frail and lanky, yet with velvety yellow tassels swaying on the slender boughs, grew to a height of twelve feet.

"Scarcely in the open, is it?" she said. "If Mrs. Kington had taken your bet and I had been judge, you would have lost it."

Then, having argued the point with the lightest banter at his command, Marcus invited her to the orchid-house, where he gallantly gave her a lovely blossom—"half-butterfly," as she said, "and half-flower, and most divinely fragrant."

This little flutter of enthusiasm on her side encouraged him. "It's too hot in here, Miss Arden," he said, "let's stroll down to the river."

"It must come," thought the girl resolutely.

"With pleasure," she answered. "There's something I've wanted to say to you—only I'm afraid."

She was following advice which Arthur Norbert had once playfully given her.

"Don't wait for a man's attack," he had said, "but drive in his outposts at once."

Marcus, remembering Mrs. Chesterfield's injunction

to be "chivalrous," replied, "Miss Arden! there is nothing you need be afraid to ask me, because there is nothing on earth that I wouldn't do for you."

"You have been extraordinarily kind," she said. "But I want you to be more generous still."

"How?" he asked. "How can I?"

"By being less kind, Mr. Hart! All our friends have come to a decision about us for which we're not quite prepared."

She met his eyes without flinching.

"What pluck!" he thought, and attributed it to "breed."

"What friends?" he asked.

"My mother and the duchess."

"If they've guessed," said he, "what I've been trying to make you feel, I for one have no reason to complain. There's something I've long wanted to say to you. The duchess knows what it is; so does your mother."

"If I know what chivalry is," Marcus reflected, "that's a touch of it!" Then, remembering Mrs. Chesterfield's warning, he added, "but however deep my feelings, Miss Arden, I should like you to understand that I'm the last man in the world to rush the thing. What I feel for you," he went on, recalling the words of the song, "is 'still as the night and deep as the sea.'" Surely that was in the right key of love-making!

Emilia turned her eyes from his face. The roll in those beady orbs was too much for her.

"I'm grateful, Mr. Hart," she said, "but I'm not ready to accept the honour you offer me, nor to—to submit . . ." but in the confusion of the moment the words she wanted seemed beyond her reach.

"Nor to submit to the preliminaries of an engagement?" he suggested.

"That is what I mean," she said.

But he had ceased to admire her pluck. The victory seemed further off than ever. Where he had suspected at worst a sort of obscure repugnance to the idea of "giving up her freedom for a man" he had come on

a firm human will. The graceful reed had changed to steel!

"But you won't refuse me the right," he said, "to appear before the world, as I've now appeared for some time, as an admirer who wishes to place everything he commands at your feet?"

Emilia thought of the coils encircling her, of her mother, of the duchess, of the path of appearances whither she had drifted with Marcus, and said, "If you will claim the right, Mr. Hart, what can I do?"

There were all the elements of coquetry, dishonesty and meanness in her reply, but she half forgave herself. Was it not one of those subterfuges to which women are driven? Had she dared to reject the man she would have done so. As it was she only sought a respite!

And he grasped her meaning. The rebuff to his vanity sent the purple blood to his cheeks till, for a second, his eyes seemed congested.

The question at any rate had approached a business footing, and he was safer there than dodging among unintelligible emotions.

"Let's understand one another, Miss Arden," he said. "I propose to you. You say you cannot consent to a formal engagement because, as I understand it, you are not yet prepared to sacrifice your freedom. But you suggest that a time may come when you will be able to take a more generous view of my claims which indirectly you recognize."

"That's nearly what I mean," she said desperately. "I want to be free for a little while to do as I like."

"It's like this, then," said he. "We remain just as we are; people outside won't see any difference, but for the present you're to be perfectly free. After that you will reconsider the matter in my favour."

"That seems what I mean," said the girl doubtfully.

"You don't fix a time limit?"

"No; be generous about that."

Hart reflected a moment. The supple, beautiful creature seemed caught in his net. She could hardly

escape now, but although jealousy was stinging him he decided to be cautious. Only a fool, he remembered, makes a woman desperate before she's finally conquered.

"You've noticed I've asked no questions," he said.

"It's good of you!" she replied nervously.

"No other man's name has been mentioned?"

"No."

"It's a compact then?"

"Yes," she replied, "a sort of compact."

"Made for the beautiful liberty-loving goddess who rules my heart!" he said, turning to theatrical memories for his phrase. "Yes, it is a compact. Only give me just one kiss to seal it. Remember, I've never had one yet, and I love you!"

She held back. "Only one," he said, "till you say 'yes' for good! I promise you! It's a bargain!"

She gave him her cheek—she was two inches taller than Marcus—but he kissed her mouth. The vision of the black bird and the stricken worm—a spasm of humiliation—danced before her mind.

"Now we'll go in and think it over," he said. "No one shall know our secret. Let them think what they like!"

Then in silence they returned to the house. The kiss of shame scourged Emilia's pride.

Meanwhile Mrs. Chesterfield, driven by her hungry curiosity, had begun to make confidential overtures to her old acquaintance the baron, who, having finished the sandwiches and lighted a cigarette, had stepped on the lawn, where Mrs. Chesterfield followed him.

"Aren't they sweet?" she murmured, glancing in the direction of the evergreens where Emilia and Marcus had disappeared.

"Sweet," replied the baron, who prided himself on his powers of adaptation to his company, "sweet is charming—charming of you, *chère dame*, I mean, as evidence of the gracious radiance you diffuse over regions whence romance has fled."

"But, baron, surely you're not a cynic," pleaded

the gentle lady. "Wherever Emilia Arden enters romance follows."

"Delightful idealist!" said the baron, watching the blue smoke of his cigarette in the still air. "No wonder you encourage our friend."

The lady was startled. Did he know how she encouraged Marcus?

"But it *will* be quite a perfect match, baron. As the friend of both, of course I'm pleased."

"Prophetic lady!" said the baron. "Will be?"

"Surely you don't suggest it won't be—after things have gone so far."

What did the man know? Had Marcus confided in him? Mrs. Chesterfield grew cautious. The baron continued silently to watch his cigarette-smoke. His nickname was "the Sphinx." In his manner to women he lived up to it. "There were such depths!" flatterers suggested.

"Of course they haven't confided in me," she said, "only——"

"Neither of the alleged contracting parties?" he broke in.

"Cynic again!" she exclaimed. "Worse and worse!"

"Some see the wolf and the lamb! Only no one knows which will gobble up the other. Learn, my dear lady, that in marriage one is eaten, the other permits himself to be devoured!"

"Is that why you have remained an audacious bachelor, baron?" she asked playfully.

"That, with the help of Providence," replied the baron piously.

"But don't you think Emilia and Marcus will be happy together? Between them they would bring into housekeeping more than the most exacting expect!"

"But who knows what the lady is leaving outside?" asked the baron. "Do you?"

"Oh, as for that we all have our little sentimental dreams," replied Mrs. Chesterfield. "They are

pleasant to look back on and need make no man jealous."

Altenstein was Hart's friend. Mrs. Chesterfield suspected rightly that they had discussed, as all their acquaintances had, the relations of Emilia Arden and Captain Norbert.

"Men who marry are intended to incur such risks. It's the badge of all the conjugal tribe!" said the baron meditatively. "I've often thought, as an ex-financier, of organizing a scheme of insurance to meet the danger and compensate victims!"

"O baron! I've no patience with your wickedness," protested the lady, who was much amused. "I can only hope that you won't put any of your dreadful ideas into Marcus's head!"

"The innocent Marcus!" said the baron. "Here he comes; the young lady looking like the victim and our friend the executioner, although in these charming domestic dramas the parts are generally reversed."

Mrs. Chesterfield watched them as they crossed the lawn, looking as little as possible like happy lovers.

"It is a mimosa tree," said Emilia to the group standing at the door in the slanting sunbeams.

"Bravo, Marcus!" murmured the baron. "Even exotic trees obey you."

"What a lovely orchid!" exclaimed Mrs. Arden, perceiving the blossom in the bosom of Emilia's dress. "My dear Mr. Hart, but you spoil us all!"

She gave the flower a name, and the sense of uncertainty which her daughter and her host had reintroduced was deadened by her botanical information.

"The old lady plays her game like an adept!" murmured the baron to Mrs. Chesterfield.

"Silence, Sphinx!" she replied with mock severity. "No scandal, if you please! Mrs. Arden is a model mother."

But when Marcus was dressing for dinner the baron, whose room adjoined, entered, bent on mischief.

"So I'm to congratulate you!" he said. "The women seem to think I've grounds."

Marcus growled.

"None of your chaff, Altenstein, please."

"But the girl didn't say no?" questioned the baron. "Did she?"

Marcus growled again.

"Didn't she?" the other resumed. "Then she said 'yes.' That's why you're looking so happy. My dear Marcus, if you knew as much about women as I do you'd take it lying down."

"I'm sick of that gag!" returned Marcus. "Take what lying down?"

"Whatever the lady gives. When is it to be?"

"That's our affair!" said Marcus.

"I see. The girl won't make up her mind. I warned you, old chap. She's waiting for Norbert's leave. What a nice little comedy!"

"Curse Norbert!" growled Marcus—only he said 'curthe.' "I'll be even with the whole gang of them before I've done."

The baron raised his eyebrows; Marcus was jealous. Then, suddenly altering his manner, he grew serious.

"Don't imagine that I want to chaff you about this business," he said. "I always warned you, only you wouldn't listen. I know these people better than you. They've set their traps for me. Most of them you can buy. But there's always something up their sleeves kept out of the bargain. I'm the only guest staying in your house—except possibly your anxious would-be mother-in-law—who doesn't despise you."

Marcus was watching him with a congested face.

"It's your money they want—not you," pursued the other. "They're all making a convenience of you" as they make a convenience of me. They can't do without us, although they can't understand us; they swallow their prejudice and aversion and try to swallow us too! That woman wants you for her daughter because she's a scheming old aristocratic adventuress without twopence. The girl's in love with

another man, for whom, if he lifted a finger, she'd leave you on your wedding day! Trust me! I know the breed! I haven't lived among them for thirty years for nothing. I hoped you would discover this for yourself. But they shan't hang up your scalp in their wigwam without me warning you!"

"Who's humbugging me—if it comes to that?" muttered Marcus. "I guess there's not much you see which I don't."

"The Duke of Evesham and all her grace's hangers-on; Mrs. Arden, who's on tenterhooks lest you shouldn't come to the scratch—the whole crew in fact! The girl who's in love with a man who can't marry her! That cunning woman, Carrie Chesterfield, who's playing a game which I haven't yet mastered. The Kingtons, who collect comic stories about you. They all talk more or less before me or to men in whose confidence I am. Marcus, you're a laughing-stock and a prize. It makes me sick to watch their fumbling game!"

"But suppose I like it? Suppose I made these people take me up because I wanted to—not because I loved 'em more than they love me? You've told me nothing. Besides, Altenstein, I mean to win. The girl shall feed out of the plate I fill for her! I've plans of my own, too: see?"

"Have you?" said Altenstein, beginning to be impressed. "If you end in wiping your boots on them, as they're wiping theirs on you, with the honest conviction that you're blessed with a natural taste for their mud, I've no complaint. I knew a man—his name became Low after he'd fixed the spelling to his taste—who was humbugged by a lot of women—the sort who are frightened to bear children, and mad about millinery and sham culture; much like your friends the Enlighteners. But a day came when he could stand it no longer. "I'm sick of artifice, and want a little nature," said Low. "I mean to find out what's under these people's hides. What d'you think, he did to see?"

"Don't know," said Hart. "Got 'em all in pawn?"

"It was more original than that. He got the worst samples on board his yacht, with the aid of his skipper, exposed them to a big gale, and paid his sailor men to swear they were on the point of going down. Low said that experiment taught him more about human nature than he had learnt in all the rest of his life. When they fancied they were going to die they all became as natural as coster girls! Some swore, some prayed. When, as he said, he'd 'found them out,' he married his housekeeper—a fine woman—she was (I discovered her for him!) and gave up fashionable life. And, Marcus, for you're a man of resource, I should like to see you take a leaf out of Low's book and try a similar experiment in the cause of science."

"Wasn't Low a Californian?" asked Marcus.

"Yes. He's dead now, but there are people on the Pacific slope who still remember his revenge."

"Look here, Altenstein," said Marcus. "You've gone a bit out of your way to say what you have said, but I take it because most of it is true. I knew this pretty nearly as well before you spoke as I know it now. You leave me to manage my own affairs! Meanwhile, if any of my friends say things you think I ought to hear, perhaps you'll tell me—especially as it's the sort of thing which comes pretty natural to you."

"All right," replied the other. "You've taken it like a man, and I'm not disappointed in you. A word to the wise is enough. You can trust me."

Then Altenstein left him to dress, and Marcus's valet discreetly reappeared. About the same time Mrs. Arden went to her daughter's room.

"Emilia," she said anxiously, "did Mr. Hart say anything this afternoon?"

"He proposed to me," she replied.

"But what happened? Do relieve my anxiety!"

Emilia looked at her mother pitifully. She was not in the least afraid of her, but she feared to make her unhappy.

"We came to an understanding," she said. "I'm

to have a sort of holiday—from the man, I mean, and to do what I like.”

“Then the engagement’s in abeyance?”

“I suppose so. At all events you needn’t worry, mother. You’re supposed to know nothing about it. Things are to go on just as they are—only on easier terms for me—and there’s no time limit.”

Warned by the strange look on her daughter’s face, Mrs. Arden desisted. “There!” she exclaimed helplessly, “do as you like, as you have done all your life! I’ve done what I can.”

Then she returned to her room, not without apprehensions.

When her mother was gone, Emilia sat down and wrote a hurried note to Arthur Norbert. Having finished it she told her maid to put it in the hall. But, meeting Mrs. Chesterfield’s maid on the landing, bound down-stairs on a similar errand, Emilia’s letter was handed to the latter. This was how Mrs. Chesterfield knew that it was written.

Before dinner, therefore, with the view of “earning her wages,” as she called it, Mrs. Chesterfield told Marcus.

“I think,” she said, “you ought to know that she is writing to him again!”

“Thanks, Carrie,” replied Marcus. “You’re a thoroughly honest woman, and I respect you.”

“Brute!” thought the amiable lady to herself with her gentlest smile.

That night at dinner Marcus’s manner towards Mrs. Arden was more filial than ever.

CHAPTER XI

MARCUS HART was morally inexplicable because of contradictory elements. Irrepressible self-assertion, verging on megalomania, was, however, the rankest feature in his character. He preferred to be hated to being ignored, to be feared rather than loved. The moral weed planted in vulgar soil was bearing its unnatural crop of poisonous fruit.

There was a letter-box in the hall at the Grange. The last post left at seven o'clock; Emilia's letter was posted twenty minutes too late to catch it. The box would not be cleared till eight on the following morning. Mr. Hart knew this.

All through dinner his thoughts turned to Emilia's letter to Norbert. He never for a moment doubted his right to read it. In his eyes it represented a simple step in self-protection.

After dinner there was bridge, or billiards for those who preferred it. Marcus cut in with Emilia against Altenstein and Mrs. Kington. Altenstein was an excellent player, Marcus unmatched. The consequence was that Mrs. Kington lost more than she could afford, and Emilia won more than her due.

"With Marcus on your side you'll make your fortune," observed Mrs. Kington half-an-hour after midnight, as the two ladies sought their rooms. "You can't lose when he's your partner and win with second-rate cards when he is. Is it because Marcus and magic both begin with M? Good-night, dearest. You'll have a nice offering in church to-morrow!"

The ladies separated on the landings. The men came up a little later. Kington looked into his wife's bedroom to scold her for her "rotten game." He

omitted to say that he had lost ten half sovereigns himself at pyramids.

"The little beast plays such a wonderful game!" said Mrs. Kington in excuse.

"That's not his only accomplishment," returned her husband.

"What's his other?" asked the lady.

"He looks fat and soft as butter but is as tough as leather. How he hates Norbert! There was a photograph of him in one of the papers which came to-night. Norbert has been appointed secretary of some commission on military education, you know, so they stuck him in among the actresses and the smart brides. You should have seen Marcus's face when some one showed it to him. For a moment he looked a regular devil! Then he said something flattering—for once the War Office had selected a good man!—or something to that effect. It was as good as an Adelphi play."

"Poor dear Emilia!" sighed Mrs. Kington, but still a little resentfully. "I hope she mayn't repent of her bargain! At any rate Marcus will teach her to play bridge!"

"I wish he'd teach you! Your game's ridiculous. But is it arranged yet?"

"The engagement with Marcus? It ought to be. He is quite the obsequious son-in-law already. I felt tempted to put ratsbane in his champagne! If I can discern the face of the sky the thing's practically settled."

"Well, the Ardens may be trusted to make the best of the business," said Kington. "Emilia, who's a girl of spirit, can seek for consolation after she's Mrs. Marcus."

"Don't be horrid," said his wife. "She has caught a Tartar and knows it."

But Mrs. Kington's maid came in the room to brush her mistress's hair, and Mr. Kington withdrew to brush his own.

In the other nuptial chambers of the Grange similar

conversations were taking place. The host was being abused or derided, Emilia Arden contemptuously pitied.

Meanwhile Marcus was not idle. When all his guests were in bed and the house silent, he left his room and descended to the dark hall by the light of a little electric lamp, opened the box with his private key, and selecting a letter addressed "Captain Norbert, Quirl Manor, Hants," retired to his own room adjoining a bath-room full of elaborate toilet appliances. A thin jet of steam driven against the ill-gummed envelope placed the enclosed note at his mercy. Marcus went back to his room and read it without a qualm.

"MY DEAR ARTHUR," it said, "You are my only real friend, and I am confessing to you because I am ashamed and wretched. You ask 'has anything been arranged?' Well, to-day I made a half-meant and half-hearted effort at escape and provoked a proposal. Heaven knows what I said! Apparently 'yes' and 'no.' Out of the confusion something he called 'a compact' formed itself. I am to have a respite on the grounds that I'm not ready yet 'to sacrifice my freedom!' After a certain time it is understood that I'm 'to take a more generous view of his claim.' Meanwhile things are to go on as they are. We—mother and I—will still appear as part of the Hart procession, chained to his conquering car. But what can I do? The 'dear duchess' made me understand that 'it is my last chance,' 'dowerless girls, etc.,' you know the old cry, 'must take what they can get.' Of course I've brought it on myself, because it was expected of me, and I, I suppose, expected it of myself. But the nearer it comes the worse it seems. One gets used to everything; I may even get used to him! When I don't see him or hear him (I have discovered his natural manner, which is appalling) the thing seems bearable; when I do see him I think—but never mind what I think. I must be a shameless wretch to speak

of it! At the remotest end of uttermost shame is brazen effrontery; the tide is sweeping me there! You have been so good to me always—although you never told me ‘not to’—that I let you see me as I really am.

“Can nothing prevent this happening? I suppose in a few months’ time I shall be a ‘Princess of Park Lane’ and what the ha’penny papers call ‘a Society leader.’ But, Arthur, I’m living in a nightmare, and no one can or will help me.

“Your old friend,

“EMILIA.

“P.S.—I forgot to say that Mrs. Chesterfield has become friendly. She lets me assume that she’s sorry for me. I wonder if she is? Mother is as usual—afraid to come to the point with me, but persuaded it’s ‘a splendid thing.’ Mr. H. is quite wonderful at bridge. You can’t help winning when he is your partner. This place is most beautiful. But if I were Mr. H., I would put all my guests into sacks and throw them in the river. Dolly Kington said openly to me to-day, ‘I wonder “His Magnificence” (they have taken your title for him) doesn’t see we’re all “on the make.” The worst of it was,’ she added, ‘this sort of business makes us all vulgarer and vulgarer. The pace he sets is so fast!’ But you, Arthur, are out of it all with your Blue Books and reports in your Quirl solitude. Ah, men have work; I wish women had. I was never taught even to think, and only spell by instinct.

“E. A.”

Hart’s face grew blacker as he read. The girl hated him, but hoped to rob him. He hated her now with a lustful hatred. But soon the meaning grew clearer. He interpreted the letter as an appeal for help. “Can nothing prevent this happening?”. What did that mean but an invitation to Norbert? The reading of the letter had revealed the hidden tide of abuse and contumely, flowing from the hearts of the women he

tried to think he had conquered. "If I were Mr. H.," he read again, "I would put all my guests into sacks and throw them in the river." Instead of capturing them they took him for their prey! After all, was not this true? Altenstein evidently thought so.

Then he remembered Low and his revenge. How could he repay these people for their contempt, hatred and mean cajolery? Desire with black thoughts burnt within him. Emilia's beauty began to haunt him under the vilest aspects. He longed to take a whip, with a long, thin lash, and scourge her white body till the blood ran! How could he slake the thirst filling him? She was nearly in his power. Norbert evidently intended doing nothing—yet. That lying intriguer, Carrie Chesterfield, had warned him that the danger would begin after he had married Emilia. She was as cunning as a weasel, but this seemed true. They meant to catch him first and plunder him afterwards.

And so he sat rigidly, the truculent victim of the crowding, vengeful thoughts flowing in on him from the accursed letter. He had always intended to know "where he stood." Now he had found it on a fiery pinnacle of shame where his pride was scorched to rags. Then, out of the base turmoil, Low's example seemed to call him to action. Above all, he longed to trample on the women—the sexless things of artifice and lies who flattered and derided him, and to whom he seemed a vast joke seated on money-bags. They mocked his manners, his looks, his speech, but with a sort of female devil-worship. And so he sat before the letter for an hour, then closed it carefully and replaced it in the box.

Remounting the stairs, he saw the light still shining under Emilia Arden's door. All the other lights were out. He listened, but no sound came. Then, shaking his big fist in the direction of her room, he returned to his own.

Emilia, propped up on pillows, was reading the Book of Job.

CHAPTER XII

THE letter reached its destination on the morning of the following day.

Quirl Manor had been used by three generations of the Norberts as their dower house, but as time went on, no dowager in the family would consent to live in this solitude. Five miles from the nearest village, it was seven from the station. The centre of a wild patch of forest land, broken up by rolling patches of heath and gorse, it was connected with the world without only by one rutty and little-used lane, and a series of footpaths leading from farm to farm, to the hamlet of Quirl. Deep woods of oak and beech concealed even the handsome Tudor chimney-stacks from the eyes of the few entomologists attracted thither by the insect life harboured in a region little changed since the days of Rufus. These and other wanderers from trodden ways came on the house unexpectedly at the end of a stately glade. They saw a small Elizabethan house with ancient red-brick gables, a paved way leading between a line of funereal yews to a Tudor porch, an unkempt garden where the shrubs planted long ago by careful hands had run riot, a collection of out-houses in bad repair at the back, and all around the now unresisted efforts of nature to reclaim for the forest possessions conquered five hundred years earlier by the effort of man. Quirl Manor had never heard the grunt of a motor-car, the ubiquitous bicyclist could only approach it by trundling his machine across the rough forest-path in which the lane was lost. What traffic there was, was carried on in country carts, and the postman, who had just delivered Emilia's letter, came over from Quirl once a

day. It had become the custom with the Norberts for the elder son to hand the manor over to the younger, thus Arthur Norbert for the last five years had become the owner. Hither occasionally he sought seclusion, and at no time in his life had solitude seemed more necessary than now.

As men grow older, unless they deteriorate from weakness of character or self-indulgence, if they are intelligent observers of themselves and of the world about them, not a few reach a point in their lives when, consciously or unconsciously, having taken their final moral bearings, they decide definitely to what goal they will direct their course. This point Arthur Norbert had now reached. Suddenly all his way seemed blocked by a mountain of misgiving. Doubts for the future and regret for the past began to press in upon him. A silent and relentless critic seemed holding sway over his mind. It told him of passing youth, of opportunities missed, of listless habits acquired, of frivolous aims undermining the dignity of his manhood. Who and what was he? "You most resemble," said this unflattering monitor, "the poor showy thing known to weak intellects of the last generation as 'the man of fashion.'"

Norbert awoke one morning to find this reproachful voice within him, coming, as it were, all-armed from nowhere. But yesterday a cold inarticulate shadow of a craving, it spoke to-day with warning. He had lived in a small and foolish world, and till now had breathed its atmosphere easily enough. He had learnt a few useless tricks in a frivolous school, had gained a certain empty reputation by his dexterity as a neat performer. But the change had come, and, the petty accomplishments in which he had excelled exposed him to self-contempt. This same voice had sent him to Quirl to take stock of himself, to decide what weeds he must burn, what wholesome crops attempt to raise. The process through which he was going, resembled that which the pious describe as repentance, only in Norbert's case it was far less violent and emo-

tional, representing rather the acceptance of a higher set of rules than of a profound moral change. Yet his conscience was sore and his vanity had shrunk.

Just as Marcus Hart determined to learn "where he was," so Norbert, because he was in the wrong place, resolved to discover where he ought to be. In the silence of the spring mornings, among the woods or in the quiet gloom of the library, where he was working on his German staff-reports, he had traced from vague beginnings the origin of the new spirit. It seemed that it first became active after he had left Emilia Arden a fortnight ago in the Park. Norbert was a man in whom affections were warm, and the sense of pity deep. Emilia's manner to him, her trust in his nature, his memories of her as a charming and frank child, her gradual growth and change into a young woman intended to shine, and endowed with the necessary accomplishments for shining, in the set ruled by the Duchess of Evesham and her satellites, had all at once combined to trouble him strangely. Here was a destiny which, for good or evil, he felt that he might guide. From this idea, deepening the sense of moral responsibility now springing with it, there grew a feeling of tenderness which the voice within him now for the first time ceased to repress. Other encouragement was derived from the work provided for him by the War Office and the satisfaction of once more discharging serviceable duties. Failure in public life and his experiences as a secretary to the Marquis of Gainsbury had made him cynical. He had been brought chiefly into contact with men on what his late chief called "their scrubby" side—the side which, in electioneering and politics finds out the shorter and meaner roads to success.

But now, when the moral reaction had set in, as it will in minds not entirely debased, the poets had called to him. The book-shelves at Quirl contained most of the poets, once his mother's favourite reading. Wordsworth, at whose works he had scarcely looked, had stirred him with his sonnets. The world had

almost made him forget that at the roots of human nature are buried the seeds whence the higher enthusiasms spring, love of Nature, love of country, love of ideals of duty. Early impulses almost obliterated by the attitude of cynical detachment which he had adopted, but which his friends thought natural, had become active again. Through the dust and disturbance clouding his mind, he could as yet see no project clearly. Emilia's family was bent on the match with Hart, the duchess had warned him not to stand in the way of it, the marriage itself offered the advantages which the men and women of his set most eagerly sought, and all the rules and conventions under which he had lived made him feel that it was too late to save her even if she desired it herself. At the same time a jealous horror settled on him whenever he thought of Hart as the father of Emilia's children. He had heard the man talking of founding a family! Miranda as the bride of Caliban was the picture which rose in his mind. Yet what revolted him apparently dismayed no one else—neither the duke, nor the duchess, nor the girl's own mother. Could he be wrong? The others, at least, were as well fitted as himself to judge. Personally he might be blinded by the physical dislike of the type and of the predatory breed from which the man descended. Then, as he looked back out of his solitude as calmly as he could at the events of the last few months, he perceived that he had pursued the man with virulent dislike and jealous opposition. Was this envy of Hart's success due to the man's indomitable energy or to wholesome resentment at seeing Caliban in power? Even before Hart had met Emilia, Norbert had disliked him. Now he loathed him. When they had first met, the man had sought his friendship, Norbert had responded by pursuing him with scarcely concealed contempt and derision. If antagonism had sprung up between them, Norbert had been the aggressor. Should he, at all risks, and with the immense sacrifice of what she seemed to

value, tempt Emilia to reject Hart in the ninth hour, offend the Duke of Evesham to whom he owed so much, and abuse the confidence which the Ardens had reposed in him? This would mean a breach in the laws of mundane hospitality, the abuse of a trust, the rejection of the code he had never yet disobeyed. Once he had insisted that his affection for Emilia was only fraternal—now he no longer refused to see in it the spark of other love.

In his doubt, and to ease his mind, he had written to Emilia. The letter he had just received was her answer. When he had read and re-read it he knew that the crisis was approaching. She had appealed to him for help. Was there "no debt to pay, no boon to grant?" Wordsworth's profoundly moving sonnet rang in his ears—had she not every claim on him after his promise? The other view—one not uncommon in his set, now filled him with shame. It thus stated itself: if Marcus Hart married Emilia he would enjoy only the right of paymaster and nominal ownership—a place befitting the vulgarian whom wealth permits and tempts to marry out of his class. This humiliating position, derisively described as "limited husbandry," they assumed that Hart was ready to accept as other men of his kind had done, before him. But now face to face with the ignominy of facts, the moral distortion of it seemed as absurd as it was obscene.

He decided to go to town at once and consult the duchess, who was angry with him for resigning the secretaryship. He might begin by trying to make his peace. That evening, therefore, he went to London, and on the following afternoon was permitted to see her in Grosvenor Square.

Norbert had been a lad at Eton when the Duke of Evesham, then Marquis of Lynton, had married Lady Anne Artover, Mrs. Arden's cousin. Having known him as a boy, the duchess had always liked him and shown her approval by making him useful, repaying him by an amiable but not quite unselfish

patronage. A duchess, however, with a will of her own and a taste for directing the course of other people's affairs, supported by the conviction that her worldly judgment is unerring, is scarcely the social force it is wise to defy. Still she was neither unmanageable nor unreasonable, and although Norbert's reception was at first a little cold, he was very far from being dismayed.

"What on earth do you want to consult me about, Captain Norbert?" she began abruptly.

Usually she called him "Arthur." He accepted the change as evidence of her grace's displeasure.

"Because there is no one else who can help me so well," he replied.

The duchess reflected a moment. Marcus Hart's black brows and bald head thrust themselves above the surface of her thoughts.

"You know I'm angry with you," she said quietly.

"Why?" he asked, although he well knew.

"Because you resigned the secretaryship without first consulting me," she said. "I thought it—well—quite a little odd."

"I hadn't time," he replied.

"You may not have had time for the work, but you had time to tell me you hadn't time!"

"I'm sorry," Norbert replied, tempted to malice; "but it occurred to me that the vacancy might be useful for your new *protégé*."

"If you really thought that, it must have been because you were jealous of Mr. Hart," replied the duchess calmly.

"I admit I don't share the general admiration for him," Norbert returned.

"Because you don't realize that, for some of us, Mr. Hart is a necessity, Captain Norbert," returned the duchess. "If a man has missed the advantages of Eton and Christchurch you are quite prepared to tie a cannon ball to his leg and drop him over Westminster Bridge."

The duchess smiled under the impression that she

had uttered a crushing retort, quite forgetful that her satire had been borrowed from the duke's slender armoury.

"In Hart's case, I should regard it as a righteous duty if I were guardian of the public morals," Norbert replied. "Meanwhile I'm afraid he must flourish in spite of me."

But the duchess continued to look on him with a disapproving gaze, so he continued—

"You and the duke have always been most kind to me, and there is nothing which would grieve me more than to vex you with an impertinence."

"Is it as bad as that?" asked her Grace, sarcastically.

"I've been brought up in a world," Norbert went on, "where we're supposed to make the most of our chances, and the bloated Marcus and his millions is, I know, a big one. For what I'm going to say I've no excuse, except that saying it makes my mind easier, so I must beg you to forgive me."

"For saying what?" asked the great lady, icily.

"Do you think you are right to cram a man like Hart down Emilia Arden's throat?"

The duchess flushed slightly. "Really, Captain Norbert," she said, "your metaphors are very ill-chosen. Emilia Arden will do exactly as she pleases. She has quite as much common-sense as I have, and knows exactly what she wants."

But Norbert shook his head. "I've known Emilia since she was a baby," he replied, "and I'm convinced the idea of marrying Hart is repugnant to her. She'll do it under pressure, but a word of advice from you would prevent it. Hart's a coarse brute with a bad record. If I were a girl I would sooner go out as a governess, or learn typewriting, than be the light of his harem."

"You astound me, Captain Norbert, you positively astound me!" exclaimed the duchess. "What does it all mean?"

"It means that I'm suffering from what I believe virtuous people call 'pangs of conscience,'" he replied.

"Have you never had them before?" asked the duchess interested, but derisive.

"Never. They crept in on me from somewhere out of the shadows at Quirl where I've been staying. Hart isn't the sort of man who ought to be allowed to marry any decent young woman. The idea that she'll be able to put him in a back place as a payer of bills and an indulgent vulgarian completely under control, is preposterous. The man is as greedy as a shark and as unscrupulous. I know the breed! You may be quite sure that if Emilia Arden marries him she won't conceal the reason, nor he forget to punish her for it."

The duchess, who was both good-natured and slightly sentimental, was stirred, but, as she interpreted facts to suit her wishes and had always suspected Emilia and Norbert of a foolish weakness for each other's society, she saw another reason for this appeal than Mr. Hart's conjugal deficiencies. At the same time she was not blind to the man's character. She had seen a truculent glitter in Mr. Hart's beady eye which she much disliked, although she preferred to ignore its meaning because Emilia and not herself would be called upon to confront it. The memory of this ugly glare made her admit to herself that Norbert's apprehensions were not unfounded. Risks of this nature, however, she regarded as inseparable from marriage. The question was to safeguard the interests of the woman compelled to incur them by suitable precautions. Intelligent lawyers, adroitly arranged settlements, might be an adequate protection even against that crowning misfortune in matrimony "a brute of a husband."

Thus a little reflection on the duchess's side produced a change in her manner. Norbert's appeal no longer seemed an impertinence on the part of a young man whom she had helped to spoil, but was condoned as a well-meant effort springing from no despicable motive.

"My dear Arthur," she said, "undoubtedly Mr. Hart is not quite the sort of man one would choose to marry one's cousin, although he is not the ogre you

paint him. But against the risks you foresee, women can be protected by settlements. Emilia hasn't a penny. As the duke said yesterday, 'the *filles sans dot* is a drug in our market.' That's why we are compelled to seek other and less exacting markets for them. 'The old order is changing,' and we must make the best of it or remain hopeless old maids. It is not as though there were another *prétendant* on the scene—such a man as yourself, for instance. I would rather see such a one marry her and love her in a cottage—or a back street in Bayswater—than give her to Hart. Unfortunately it is Hart or no one. That is why I've encouraged my cousin. And of one thing we may be sure, and that is, Emilia won't marry him unless she chooses! She is not one of your yielding clinging doves, but a girl with a mind and temper of her own—her mother's positively afraid of her. But unless Prince Charming comes along and rescues her from the ogre, it's my impression that she *will* marry him, and, in my opinion, taking the world as it is, Emilia will be right. Meanwhile it is useless for you and me to worry ourselves over what only indirectly concerns us."

But although he had heard such opinions as these from the duchess and her friends a hundred times before without enduring a qualm, because he had accepted them as the necessary conventions of a society from which Nature must be expelled whenever she questions the artificial rules on which it turns, he listened now with a sickening feeling in his heart. He epitomized all the duchess had said to him into a few brutal sentences. "Since you can't marry the girl yourself, and there's no one else in the field, she must take Hart unless she prefers to be an old maid!"

Where was the romance now which had seemed to be gathering round Emilia?

"Emilia won't marry Hart just yet," said Norbert, feeling foolish and defiant, recalling the girl's letter.

"I know that," replied the duchess. "My cousin tells me the engagement is in abeyance. Emilia is in

the enjoyment of what she sarcastically calls 'a holiday.' Perhaps she's waiting for something or some one. Meanwhile it is greatly to be hoped that no one will tempt her to do anything foolish. As I told her mother, 'Emilia will get used to the idea in time.' But tell me about your new duties at the War Office, Arthur."

And because Norbert feared to pursue the subject further and the duchess had had more than enough of it, they talked about the hopelessness of military reform in a country where the citizen is bent on having all his fighting done by proxy.

CHAPTER XIII

MARCUS HART was none the less determined to display himself on what he conceived to be an impressive and picturesque scale, because "a group of smart parasites had marked him for their prey." The phrase was Baron Altenstein's, who, having applied the ointment, was now bent on rubbing it into his friend's eyes.

"They've made a regular Timon of you, Marcus," said the baron. "You must find your cave to complete the picture."

"Who's Timon?" asked Marcus.

"A man in a play by Shakespeare, fleeced by a smart gang of his day," replied the baron. "I once saw the thing played in Vienna. There's a lesson for you in it."

"I'll took it up," said Marcus, who, in due course, summoned his secretary, who produced a great illustrated edition of the play with a spirited edition of Timon speeding his parting guests with a shower of plates, and a grim engraving of the generous Athenian, all beard and eyebrows, brooding in his cave on the ingratitude of man.

"They won't catch me in a cave!" thought Marcus, who nevertheless found comfort in Timon, whom he regarded, like himself, as a generous and enlightened philanthropist. "The only difference between us is that I know the value of money and he didn't. A fellow need only be good-natured and friendly to bring all these delicate vultures about his carcase, lies and flattery for beak and claws! Still this chap Timon had no real pluck, he took it lying down in spite of all his roarings!"

Timon had nothing to teach Marcus, who preferred Low's example for dealing with ingratitude.

"No! Marcus didn't intend to take it sitting down. He would be even with them in the end. He never forgot a slight nor forgave an injury! He had entered a world where the women ruled, and lost his bearings a bit. Now he had found them he would let them know!

Desire and jealousy, almost ravenously active, claimed a double satisfaction. There had been a moment—a superfine moment!—when Marcus had actually persuaded himself that he was "one of their set!" He had arrayed himself in their plumes, minced in their gait, tried to fly with their wings like a great hairy bumble-bee mimicking the flutter of a butterfly. That illusion the purloined letter had completely dispelled. Now a list of those deserving punishment at his hands rose before his mind. First there was Emilia Arden. What was her scheme? It was clear she intended to marry him when it suited her convenience, and "play her game afterwards."

A nice moral lot indeed! Marcus wasn't a saint by any means, but he wouldn't descend to that. "You wait, my lady!" he growled aloud to himself. "You wait! I'll teach you your lesson after you're Mrs. Hart!" His mind gloated over every aspect of the beautiful cunning girl exposed to the punishment which his coarse nature and vindictive spirit had already prepared. Marcus wasn't the man to shrink from the exercise of his rights!

Then there was Norbert, the only one of them who had never tried to humbug him. From the first he had openly opposed and mocked him. Marcus had even complained to the Duchess of Evesham. "You mustn't mind Arthur Norbert," she had said smilingly. "He's naturally a little jealous. We have all spoilt him, and he can't brook a rival you know, Mr. Hart!"

How they had all combined to trick and cajole him! As he had gathered the truth in the light of

Emilia's letter, Marcus almost despised himself for an obtuseness nearly blinding him to reality.

But what was there you couldn't hide under a little veneer? A dozen scraps of a dozen half-remembered conversations now told their tale. The whole gang of 'em was bent on plunder! The duchess, however, must be left out of his list, partly because she was out of range and partly because she represented part of a system rather than a being with a separated identity to be scourged and flouted. Moreover, Marcus still proposed to become a permanent part of the machinery which the duchess strove to turn to her own advantage and that of her poor relations. Marcus hadn't by any means done with it yet. He had come to stay.

Thus, slowly, out of the mists of his hate, the names of those on whom he desired to trample, arose—Norbert, Emilia, and Mrs. Chesterfield, who had accepted his bribes, pretended to act as his spy and given information to the enemy. Then there were others, friends of Norbert or Emilia, whom he knew secretly hated him, who invented comic scandal concerning his speech, his appearance, his manners, his morals. Mrs. Chesterfield, with a subtle spite, had not spared him this aspect of his case! The little Jezebel! How she had had her knife into him from the first, under pretence of friendship!

Low was a man, he was!

His thoughts turned on this example. The thing, he felt, could be improved upon. Marcus was a man of big ideas. He had what his friend Altenstein called the dramatic instinct.

The day after reading Emilia's letter, Marcus and the baron had had a long talk.

"Low didn't do it on a big enough scale," said Marcus.

"He wasn't big enough man," said the tempter, "and his people weren't big enough, for the matter of that. He meant it for a sort of scientific experiment."

"I don't see where science comes in," observed Marcus.

"Well, he wanted to see," said the baron.

"See what?" asked Marcus.

"See how a lot of women brought up in the lap of luxury, fed on flattery and kept under glass cases, would behave in hardship and terror of death. For, with the help of his skipper, Low played up to that very cleverly. On his side, it was a grim practical joke," explained the baron, "on theirs it was the duce of a nasty experience."

"And what did he discover?" asked Marcus, deeply impressed.

"Low told me that the whole lot of them became as natural as monkeys. It was, he said, 'a sight!'"

"I'll go one better than Low!"

"I'm sure of that. You've more imagination, Marcus. Low frightened himself."

"I was never frightened in my life, and never likely to be," replied Hart; "without my nerve I should still be earning twenty dollars a week in a broker's office."

The baron knew this was true, and nodded approvingly. He did not know of the purloined letter, and imputed the singular change in the other entirely to the fact that he had opened his eyes. Altenstein had some real friendship for Marcus, but his admiration for the other's unscrupulous audacity was tainted by the usual jealousy. Hart, by sheer push and impudence, had thrust himself in where the baron, who had less to offer, had failed to enter. Altenstein, too, considered Marcus "rather a common fellow." When, therefore, he helped the other to understand that his social victory was the meanest of triumphs—the victory of the net over the bird, not of the bird over the net—Altenstein was gratifying something else besides a love of truth. The contemptuous arrows which the duchess's set had launched on Marcus, however, were tipped with the same poison that they occasionally loosed at him. If, therefore, he could set Marcus on at them like a sturdy wire-haired terrier at a collection of delicate pet lap-dogs,

he would be gratifying a double appetite and providing for his own amusement as the innocent onlooker at a game of which he was supposed not to understand the rules.

Melodrama has always had a profound attraction for unfinished minds, and Marcus Hart had not a little of the primitive man in him. His tastes were crude and violent. The only novels he read were Victor Hugo's in translation, or impossible stories of wonder by lesser men. "Give me excitement!" Marcus was accustomed to say. As he was not a sportsman, he found it in a strange sort of self-contemplation. He was a big man, and he meant the world to know that he was a big man. He had just discovered that that part of it which he aimed at subduing contemplated him as the victim to be swallowed and forgotten. So far his dealings with it had been in the thin vein of mean comedy—a play in which he had been worsted. He now proposed—with the example of Low before him—to change the character of the drama and create surprise, or possibly horror on a stage hitherto filled by the cunning and intrigue by which his pride had been humbled.

"We'll see," said he to himself, "what they're really made of."

The types on which he now intended to "experiment," as he called it, were in his mind. Marcus, therefore, commenced to take his measures. Now he knew that the Enlighteners were as eager of novelty as the ancient Athenians, but much less intelligent. Mr. Hart, therefore, wrote to the Duchess of Evesham and said that he was troubled with a somewhat original idea, and that, if her grace, as president of the club, would sanction it, he proposed summoning a meeting at his house to consult with them collectively. "However absurd or even preposterous my scheme may appear," wrote Mr. Hart, "it is at least one of those things calculated to keep us alive and set the world an example of enterprise."

The duchess's curiosity was excited, and she agreed

to take the chair. Marcus issued his circulars, and the members eagerly obeyed the summons. Mrs. Kington pretended that Marcus proposed to share his wealth equally among them and retire into a Trappist monastery; Mrs. Chesterfield, now nervously aware that Mr. Hart watched her with a queer look in his eyes whenever they met, thought it not impossible that their secretary, "the most liberal of men," might be considering a plan for endowing the club with an annual income, and possibly a home in the country. But although all guessed, gossiped or jeered, none had any idea of what was stirring in Marcus's mind.

In due course the Enlighteners met in his great picture-gallery, on which, with the help of the dealers and under the advice of Baron Altenstein, a reputed connoisseur, he had spent enormous sums.

At one end of the room was a buffet lavishly prepared for afternoon tea or less simple refreshments, such as piles of magnificent peaches, bowls of premature strawberries scarcely less costly. Wherever room could be found were vases of roses, and rose-trees in tubs in full flower filled the corners. The chairs were arranged in a semi-circle round a small platform, where the duchess, bearing a bouquet of roses, sat supported by the secretary in a frock-coat and a buff waistcoat.

As the members took their seats Mr. Hart was annoyed to perceive that Mrs. Arden (to whom he had sent an invitation) was unaccompanied by Emilia, who was still a member of the committee. "She's enjoying a holiday!" he thought savagely. That the girl was "enjoying a holiday" from his society had become a joke in the club, of which he was not unconscious. Still he presented his most smiling aspect (in harmony with the big carnation in his button-hole) to an audience rustling in silks, chiffon and laces, and fluttering with aigrettes and plumes. Here and there in the background was a black coat. The duchess had brought Marcus's acquaintance, the Bishop of Burley, a distinguished prelate on the

look-out for pious sensations, of whom it was said that "he left no good thing unadvertised." Marcus had exercised his right in inviting a few chosen guests; among them, Baron Altenstein and Sir Japhet Cuddy Hill, the world-famous proprietor of popular newspapers, whom an eagle eye for "stirring actualities" had made a power in the land. Sir Japhet and the bishop sat side by side, ready to compare notes, undismayed by the murmuring throng of beautiful and much-dressed women.

"They'll get it talked about outside between them, anyway," thought Marcus.

The duchess stood up.^o The murmurs respectfully ceased. Having smelt the magnificent bouquet in compliment to Mr. Hart, who had provided it, and adjusted her *pince-nez*, her grace observed that the meeting was a little unusual, inasmuch as no one except the secretary knew why it had been called; not that that was a disadvantage; on the contrary, it had created rather what the duchess ventured to describe as 'an atmosphere of mystery,' such as, in these mosaic times, the imaginative—and all Enlighteners were imaginative—longed to breathe. "Perhaps it is because we don't know why we've come, that we came here so eagerly," said the duchess. "As a clever man said to me yesterday,"—her grace deemed it unnecessary to inform her audience that it was a platitude of the duke,—"'curiosity is the beginning of useful knowledge.' This, I hope not unworthy thirst, our secretary, I trust, will proceed to satisfy."

The duchess sat down amid a refined murmur of applause from the members, and considerably louder signs of approval from the bishop, Sir Japhet, and other visitors.

Then the eyes of the audience turned on Marcus, who, in his buff waistcoat, sat the solid embodiment of aggressive self-confidence. His address, prepared with the help of his secretary, contained, he was persuaded, the necessary flourishes. It had, he began, hitherto been his fate to touch, at very rare intervals,

on what he might describe as the fringes of romance. Most of them, alas! were compelled to live in prosaic regions. "The antres vast, the deserts idle," "the magic casements looking out on the foam of perilous seas forlorn" (here the audience suspected Mr. Hart's literary assistant), were scarcely among the phenomena with which men who led "the strenuous life" were called upon to deal.

Here Marcus looked from his typed notes at his audience, and perceived that "the deserts idle" and "magic casements" had perplexed them only slightly less than they had bewildered himself. Evidently his literary assistant was talking rubbish. He decided to cut the "gush" after one more allusion. "But," he added, "if romance won't come to meet us, we can go out and look for romance!"

"Hear! hear!" exclaimed Sir Japhet, to whom the sentiment appealed.

Marcus bowed in their direction and continued: "I'll spare you the excuses I was tempted to make for a project which practical men and practical newspapers will doubtlessly pooh-pooh as the enterprise of a hare-brained crank."

Sir Japhet instinctively felt in his pocket for his pencil, recalling earlier days.

"What I'm going to say, ladies and gentlemen," resumed Hart, "is between ourselves, at least for the present, for I'm not prepared—here he glanced at his notes—"as a seeker after the picturesque and a maker of romance, to be advertised or laughed at as a treasure-hunter. Well, you've all read *Treasure Island* (Marcus had never heard of it until the day before), "that delightful and romantic story by R. L. Stevenson" (he rolled out the initials with an air of completest acquaintance with the author). "Well, if I haven't a *Treasure Island* for the club, I've found something pretty nearly as good."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Sir Japhet to the Bishop of Burley. "I mean, my lord, how astonishing from such a man—unless it's a joke!"

"We will wait and see," the bishop replied.

"Last winter," continued Marcus, "I was cruising in the Canary Islands, and visited all the islands of that interesting archipelago. It chanced that I met at Palma an old Canarian sailor of obvious Guanche descent, who was reputed to be a hundred years old. The old fellow came off to see my yacht, *The Dawn*, and, if I may say so without boasting, was a good deal interested in what we had to show him—especially in a rather neat thing in musical-boxes. Now, I am able to speak Spanish—my one linguistic accomplishment, ladies and gentlemen—and by dint of a little flattery—mutual flattery, I may say, we became friends. The old fellow was reported to carry a secret about him, and to have been a pirate and the son of a pirate, and I wished to learn his history. In a prosaic age to meet a live pirate within seven days of London was the sort of thing that appealed to me."

"Hart ought to have a fine taste in pirates!" Sir Japhet slyly observed to the bishop.

"I took Gomez for a brief cruise with me," Marcus continued, "treated him like a prince and won his confidence. It chanced at that time that there had been a good deal of gossip about hidden treasure among sea-faring folk all over the world. You will remember, no doubt, several wild-goose chases for this purpose, and at least one book was written describing the failure of the treasure seekers. Now Gomez had heard of this, and the topic came up again and again between us. Gomez informed me that he knew where there was treasure to be found. His grandfather had helped bury it and left him the clue! 'Then why don't you unearth it, Gomez?' I asked, to get a rise out of the old fellow. But he was quite serious. His treasure, it seems, had been hidden by Barbary pirates towards the end of the eighteenth century, and was guarded by demons! 'Well, tell me where it is, and I'll go and dig it out,' said I. 'Not while I am alive,' replied the old man solemnly. 'After you're dead, then,' I insisted. Of course I wasn't in earnest, but,

to my surprise, Gomez was. To prove it he offered rather an odd bargain. He had, as I said, taken a violent fancy to a musical-box. We showed him how to wind it up and to switch on all its orchestral effects. It was the first thing of its kind this ancient semi-barbarian had seen, and his favourite tune was the march from Tannhäuser! So, to my surprise, in exchange for the musical-box, Gomez offered to leave me, after his death, the document which had come to him from his father, indicating the exact spot on a certain island where, years before, the treasure had been buried. To this I agreed. My agent—I'm interested in some banana plantations near Las Palmas—was on board, and I instructed him to see that Gomez kept his promise. This the old fellow faithfully did. Gomez died six weeks ago, and last week I received a queer sort of chart which has every appearance of being authentic."

At this point Marcus paused for the buzz of excitement to spend itself.

"Rather a queer tale," whispered Sir Joseph to his neighbour.

"I've heard stranger ones from missionaries," replied the bishop, "and I'm no sceptic."

"Well done, Marcus!" reflected Altenstein. "Didn't know it was in you."

"What a pity Emilia refused to come," thought Mrs. Arden. "I never saw the man to less disadvantage."

"Of course, ladies and gentlemen," Marcus resumed, "you are laughing at me for being taken in by this old and worn story, but the truth is I cannot help wanting to believe it's true, and I want all your encouragement to strengthen my faith. I hope, therefore, that you won't consider me quite unworthy of acting as your secretary when I tell you that I'm determined to put Gomez's chart to the test and defy the demons who are probably still guarding the treasure, if it's there."

This spirited announcement evoked a burst of applause.

"In any case," continued Marcus, "it seems to me that Gomez's story is worth verifying. The thing can be done so easily; it offers a delightful yachting trip, and I hope you won't think me quite a lunatic when I inform you that I've already wired to Southampton to have *The Dawn* put in commission. My skipper came up to see me last night. No, ladies and gentlemen, he didn't quite laugh in my face. He merely said that it was an excellent excuse for a cruise. But the artist in search of romance needs kindred spirits to encourage him. And there is a certain enchantment in this idea which, however preposterous it may seem to common-sense, must appeal to members of Enlighteners as it appeals to me. All Enlighteners must be treasure-seekers. It is their search as much as mine. I propose, therefore, to beg eight members of the club to join me in this quest as my guests."

The members stirred. "Who would the eight guests be?"

"I only wish the yacht were big enough to accommodate the whole club," continued Mr. Hart, who had noted their little flutter of excitement, "but in any case the good ship, *The Dawn*, will be freighted with the good wishes of our fellow-members."

"Will there be any danger in the trip?" asked the duchess suddenly.

"None beyond the discomfort of sea-sickness, your grace," replied Mr. Hart.

"Then you mustn't expect me to come," returned her grace playfully.

"I knew only too well that London couldn't spare your grace," said Mr. Hart gallantly. "My idea was—to give dignity to the expedition and possibly to escape some of the derision that this plunge into romance must tempt—to assume that it will be carried out under the auspices and advice of the Enlighteners' Club, and to devote to the club's uses the trophies (if any) which we may bring back. This, indeed, was my main reason for summoning this meeting. I am asking the club for their support and approval with

this object. When the public hears that the Enlighteners' Club has sent out an expedition to a fairly remote island to look for treasure they will be impressed. Whereas, if they learn that Mr. Hart, the financier, is responsible for the enterprise, its nature would be misunderstood (here some one giggled audibly) and its romance sacrificed. For, ladies and gentlemen, the Enlighteners' treasure-search represents a protest against the spirit of the time. It will prove, if proof be needed, that the spirit of romance can never die."

With this, Marcus sat down amid a buzz of excitement, which even the rising of Sir Japhet Cuddy Hill in search of further information did not entirely silence.

Sir Japhet, after apologizing for speaking, inasmuch as he had not the honour to be a member of the club, ventured to point out that Mr. Hart had not yet given them the name of his island.

Marcus regretted his inability to satisfy his friend's curiosity. "I have decided," he said, "to keep my island a secret from all on board, including the skipper, till we have been six hours at sea. To name the place to you, Sir Japhet—I will go so far as to say it is less than ten days from Southampton—would be to find the place crowded with excursion steamers."

"Hear, hear!" murmured the Enlighteners.

"Off Africa or America?" asked the unabashed Sir Japhet.

Marcus shook his head and regretted his inability to give further information; "quite," as the bishop ironically observed to his neighbour, "like a member of the ministry."

"Hear, hear!" murmured the club, on whom "the treasure" now began to loom as a golden fact, for it wasn't likely that a man like Marcus would be at the expense of seeking it if he wasn't quite satisfied that it really existed, even if he put it there himself!

"I assume," said the duchess cautiously, "that the

club is not expected to subscribe to the expenses of this most alluring expedition?"

"I shall esteem it an honour to be permitted to bear all expenses," Marcus replied magnificently.

"Under these circumstances," returned the duchess, "I propose that the club thank its new enlightened and public-spirited secretary for the information laid before it, and suggest that he be appointed leader of our treasure quest. I need not assure him that our best wishes will follow him and those members of the club whom he may select as the companions of his quest."

This resolution was put before the club and carried enthusiastically, and on the following morning most of the daily papers informed their readers that the Enlighteners' Club intended to fit out an expedition to seek for the treasure known to have been concealed by Barbary pirates on an unknown island "somewhere in the Atlantic."

"This expedition," the *Daily Trumpet* informed its innumerable readers (Sir Japhet was the proprietor), "the well-known financier and famous yachtsman, Mr. Marcus Hart, has been selected to lead. It could not be in better hands."

Thus, in a few hours, the story was abroad, and Marcus began to be bombarded with letters from gentlemen and ladies anxious to share the booty as well as the danger of his search.

"Hanged if I quite see your little game, Marcus," said Altenstein on the following day. "If you mean to drown your 'pals' or maroon 'em on a desert island like the bristly old buccaneer you look, it seems to me that you're over-advertising the business."

"Leave the game to me," replied Marcus, "and I've an idea that you'll be amused and morals generally elevated!"

CHAPTER XIV

TWO days after Hart's announcement to the Enlighteners' Club, Norbert, who had returned to Quirl on the morning following his interview with the duchess, was sitting in the study by a window opening on the double row of yews, whose dark boughs made a sombre contrast with the vivid green waving in the May breeze on the forest trees beyond, when he saw Felkin, his man, ambling heavily across the rough lawn towards the rusty iron gate of the inner garden. The staff at Quirl consisted of Felkin and his wife, aged retainers almost past service, who had known Norbert since he was a baby in arms—an advantage of which they were sometimes tempted to boast as a claim conferring certain rights of tiresome self-assertion. Felkin was valet, butler and gardener, the remaining domestic duties were discharged by his wife with equal efficiency.

Why was Felkin running? As a rule he was as slow of gait as of speech.

Stepping through the open window into the afternoon sunshine Norbert went to meet him. "Remember," he called to him, "that 'the wicked flee whom no man pursueth!'"

Felkin preferred this form of address from his master probably because he sought mental refreshment in ponderous repartee. In the present instance he was too breathless to indulge his simple taste, so he merely replied that there were two ladies at the other side of the further gate in "one of those motor-cars."

Suddenly the peremptory "toot toot!" of the horn was heard above the murmur in the boughs of the big beeches.

"The gate's padlocked, sir, and I was running for the key. For unless they were visitors for us they wouldn't be where they are."

Norbert was about to question the soundness of Felkin's argument, when, against a background of furze in full flower, he beheld two ladies approaching by the winding way leading to the house, and, to his wonder and delight, recognized Emilia Arden as one of them.

"It's Miss Arden!" he exclaimed.

"So it is," replied Felkin, who knew her well. "Dear, dear, sir! they must ha' climbed that gate!"

"Go in and get tea, Felkin!" said Norbert. Then he hurried out of the garden to meet them. The other lady by this time had also removed her protective draperies, and he recognized Mrs. Kington.

Had Emilia come for the answer to her letter to which he had not yet dared to reply?

"Does Quirl always close its gates on motorists, Mr. Norbert?" asked Mrs. Kington, all smiles and vivacity.

"By no means," he replied. "The whole staff, or rather, the better half of it, rushed off in search of the key at the summons of your horn. But it's a most gallant invasion of our pathless woods! Your motor is 'the first that ever burst' on this trackless wilderness!"

As he spoke he studied Emilia's face and guessed that she intended the other to act as spokeswoman.

"We've defied your dragons on business of the utmost importance, Captain Norbert, haven't we, Emilia?" continued Mrs. Kington.

"Then you must want tea," he replied.

They were walking together towards the house.

"Desperately," replied Mrs. Kington. "My mouth's full of dust and adventurous insects. We're too parched to talk, aren't we, Emilia? And is this Quirl?"

Mrs. Kington paused before the quiet house plunged in its dreams behind the sad yews, and shaded from

the afternoon sun on the south-west by a group of magnificent beeches.

The world of decayed leaves, rustling undergrowth, where the timid tread of the young rabbits alone broke the silence, for the moment subdued the frivolity she cultivated. After the glitter of Piccadilly and the roar of the traffic from which she had emerged scarcely four hours before, this abode of greens, yellows, and decaying browns, this quiet region of woods and pastoral murmurings seemed full of half-ominous magic and the menace of a weightier knowledge.

"How enchanting!" she exclaimed. "This is where you hide yourself, Captain Norbert. But Emilia never told me how sad it was. Those forbidding black trees—yews, are they?—remind me, remind me—but never mind what they remind me of."

"Of churchyard things?" suggested Norbert, wondering why Emilia was so silent. "Perhaps it's because we are a tomb of an order passing away before the blast of motor-horns and the clattering rush of the century. I live here because no one else can or will!"

"Live here, Captain Norbert!" she repeated. "The place is a dream—at least it is in May with the furze ablaze and the woods a ripple of bluebells and wild hyacinths."

"She has all the phrases pat," reflected Emilia, who had heard them uttered a few days before with variations at The Grange, for the edification of Mr. Hart.

So, whilst Mrs. Kington continued to gush with all the sincerity of her temporary enthusiasm—for, as most women of her temperament, she prided herself on being an "artist" when she did not forget that it was her rôle to appear as one—they walked down the paved way between the ranks of funereal yews, passed through the dark hall smelling of damp and forgotten winters, suggesting withered memories, vanished faces,

and forgotten voices, and entered Norbert's study, where Felkin was preparing the tea.

"Will you pour it out, please?" said Norbert to Mrs. Kington.

Mrs. Kington obeyed; Felkin reappeared with a jug of cream and some sandwiches. There was a moment of silence.

"It's years since you were here?" said Norbert to Emilia, to break it.

"Five years," she answered. "The last time with my brother."

"Of course Mr. Marcus Hart is at the back of this business," said Mrs. Kington suddenly. "He's at the back of most things just now, isn't he, Emilia? But perhaps you've read about it in the papers—at least the ha'penny papers."

"My paper is a day late, and I only see *The Times*," Norbert replied.

"Of course *The Times* wouldn't put it in—at least yet. It's too sensational. But shall I tell the story or you, Emilia?"

Mrs. Kington looked at Emilia inquiringly.

"I wasn't at the meeting. I never heard what Mr. Hart said. Besides, you've told it so often," Emilia replied.

"It's a wonderful story, all about pirates and buried treasures. Mr. Hart told it to the club," resumed Mrs. Kington, rushing at her subject. "It seems Mr. Hart knew an old pirate who, after he died, left him a chart showing where a certain treasure had been buried on a desert island not more than ten days from England by a decent steamer. Of course Mr. Hart means to find this treasure——"

"Trust His Magnificence!" Norbert interrupted.

"Exactly. If there is a hidden treasure he's the sort of man to find it, although Emilia, who, it seems, has private information, doesn't believe in it."

"Then why is he going to look for it unless he's paid for his trouble?" asked Norbert. "That isn't like our friend."

"Well, he will be paid in a way," replied Mrs. Kington.

"How?" asked Norbert.

"To put it coarsely, as an advertisement," said Emilia.

"I see," he replied. "He knows the value of that! Perhaps he put the treasure there on purpose."

Here Emilia took up the story. Mr. Hart, she explained, looked on the whole business as an excuse for a yachting trip. At least that wasn't unreasonable! Of course he knew that the Enlighteners were always on the look-out for a novel excitement. This treasure-hunt in their name provided them with that! But Mr. Hart was bent on taking some of them with him. Emilia and Mrs. Kington had been invited, but could not make up their minds whether they ought to go.

"Emilia means without consulting you," corrected Mrs. Kington, "for of course we're awfully keen on going, but the fact is we want you to go too—to look after us! You see, he's only asking women, and we're not quite sure what he means to do with us! He might—one never knows"—here Mrs. Kington looked charmingly roguish—"sell us to the Sultan or the Bey of Tunis, or some other oriental potentate."

"But how can I come?" Norbert asked. "I'm the last man Hart would want on his yacht."

"You are wrong there," replied Mrs. Kington. "But Emilia knows more about that than I do."

She looked at Emilia as though to say, "it's your turn now!"

"I told Mr. Hart I would not go unless you were asked," replied Emilia simply.

"The whole business is too extraordinary for me!" exclaimed Norbert. "I'm lost!"

"You're not really," protested Mrs. Kington. "It's quite simple when once you've fathomed it. The club is simply scrambling for invitations! There's to be no one asked but Enlighteners! Naturally we want some other man. Though you resigned the

secretaryship you're still a member—in fact, the only man practicable. But give me a cigarette, Captain Norbert, and let me try to soothe my motor-shattered nerves whilst Emilia takes you out into the garden and talks you round. That's why we have come. For we must have you! Emilia has penetrated depths in this 'problem,' as Mrs. Chesterfield calls it, not yet plumbed by me!"

Norbert glanced at Emilia: her eyes said "Come." Then, taking a box of cigarettes from the mantelpiece, he handed them to Mrs. Kington and struck a light for her.

"Hart as a buccaneer with a crew of ladies, or as a new Jason in search of a gaudier Golden Fleece is a subject for musical comedy, impure and simple,—nothing else!" he said.

"We knew you'd say that. But take him out in the garden to make it plain," said Mrs. Kington, blowing a roguish cloud of smoke above the projection of her white motor-cap.

"If it's possible," said Norbert, interpreting the understanding between the two young women. Then he accompanied Emilia across the lawn, whence they passed by a patch of blazing gorse to the grassy fringe of the forest. Here they stopped under the green shade of the beeches.

"What does it mean?" he asked, "unless it's brute swagger on the picturesque side, a vulgar effort to bewitch the world with cheap magnificence flavoured with melodrama."

"He's quite visible under that!" returned the girl.

"How you hate him!" said he. "Emilia, I had your letter. I couldn't answer it. I was afraid to!"

"Why afraid?" she said swiftly.

"Because of the remedy!"

She quivered with delight. He had said what she had longed to make him say.

"It's mad, of course, to ask you to leave all that!" A movement of his hand suggested what was outside the leafy solitudes hiding them. "But there is a stern

alternative—all sacrifice on your part, but it's honest, and you would be free."

Suddenly it seemed to them that they had reached the end of the wavering way of thwarted emotions by which they had travelled. The girl's eyes shone, her heart was beating, but she too was bent on an experiment. Her will was cleft in twain. Part of her clung to Norbert passionately, but the baser element was greedy still for Hart's spoils. The forces building up her conduct had moulded her selfishness to the pitch at which its grossness becomes invisible to its victim. This was still the dominant power in her nature, in spite of her love, which, in some unadmitted way, she yet hoped to satisfy. She believed that her duty was to marry Hart and to make the best of her fate. She was not the first woman to marry a man—an enemy even, whom she hated and somewhat feared! The marriage seemed a clear duty to her family, herself, her love of luxury and even to Arthur Norbert, who at one time had preached the doctrine of expediency which she accepted.

But his appeal had deeply touched her—first as a generous sacrifice, next as a profoundly flattering tribute. It provided the love for which she yearned. Tears sprang to her eyes as he grasped her hands, and they kissed as lovers for the first time.

"I love you for what you say and for what you haven't said!" she exclaimed. "You have been my hope, but hard things are demanded of women. I haven't a penny; you're scarcely richer. No! It can't be. The thing will have to be gone through with. I know girls who have had to do worse. The woman who marries to-day doesn't quite sell herself. Mr. Hart won't have the monopoly of my freedom."

"If you can't see, don't try to," she went on, watching his troubled face. "There are ugly things which women understand but can't explain. Since I know you do care for me—a little, I'm happy in a new way, even if we can never be anything more to each other than what we are now!"

At least the moment was hers! But the woman whom he once thought he knew had become a mystery, ready to face devilish risks.

"You can't go through with it," he said, "this marriage, I mean—you can't."

"No?" she said, "no? But a woman must do what she must—what she's been trained for. Are you sure the worst risks aren't the man's? Whether I shall have courage to try, I don't yet know. My mind now is a whirl of uncertainty, but with a purpose running through it like a glare of light across an ugly room."

"What is the purpose?" he asked.

"It depends on the impression Mr. Hart makes on me after this strange cruise. I mean to go, Arthur, and I mean you to come, too! Mr. Hart is going to ask you. Carrie Chesterfield, Gertie Kington, Lady Horham—he has invited them all—all said he must. I put them on! He knew I was coming here this afternoon. It's his motor-car. Come for my sake! Mrs. Kington and Carrie Chesterfield are supposed to chaperon me. But without you I shall be lost. There's nothing—at least nothing definite between Mr. Hart and myself. I want—but you would never understand what I want even if I could tell you!"

She stopped and looked at him.

"You're bent on an awful experiment—a ghastly comparison," said Norbert, half reading her design.

"No," she said, "it's not that—it's less disgraceful and selfish. The thing will unroll itself, and then you'll see. Don't tell me what you're thinking! I see everything—the ugly side, I mean—as plainly as you can. Give me leave for this one cruise to do as I like. I know what you sacrifice; but for my sake, come and defy what needs defying!"

He looked at her in doubt, but she resumed her entreaty.

"It's only for three weeks at most, and may save me! There's a mystery about this cruise, a danger possibly, and a glamour such as children find in fairy

tales. Come and make me happy for once! Come for my sake! Come, Arthur, come!"

Then, in a weak moment, because he loved her, and perhaps because he hated Hart, he answered, "I'll come, Emilia, if the man asks me!"

Then she heaved a sigh of relief and knew that she had conquered.

"Whatever happens, whatever I choose to do or am compelled to do, this man loves me!" This thought filled Emilia's mind. But he only felt that he had never known her before. All the old landmarks of acquaintance seemed swept away.

"We must go back," she said. "If you only knew how I hated going, although I'm carrying back a treasure in my heart!"

And so reluctantly they returned to the garden. Mrs. Kington, still with a cigarette in her mouth, was standing by the open French window, smoking. Emilia Arden lowered her veil to hide her eyes. The thrushes were singing, and, through their clumsier song, ran the delicate ripple and thrill of a nightingale. He heard it in a dream. The world had changed for Norbert. Finer elements had filtered into the false serenity in which he had tried to merge himself, troubling his reason, complicating what but yesterday had seemed simple facts.

"Don't look so worried," she said, glancing suddenly through her veil, as he held open the broken gate for her to pass again into the tangled garden, "remember you're only doing me a vast kindness! Remember, too, there are things too humiliating for a woman to confess—in words. Only let me play my game and help me to play it!"

"Play your game, Emilia!" he replied. "It seems to me none of us do anything else but play our game. Heaven know what we're playing at! We seem shadows in an impossible world where Hart's a demi-god."

"I'm not a shadow," she exclaimed vehemently "nor are you! You're the one unselfish man in this

greedy wilderness. It's the others who make it impossible. Gertie Kington, there at the window watching us, is real enough." "Gertie!" she called to her friend, "Captain Norbert's coming!"

"Hurrah!" cried the other. "I am glad. How absolutely sweet of you, Captain Norbert!"

Then the three stood a minute on the unweeded garden path. A bright saffron butterfly poised for a second over a patch of wallflower that filled the air with fragrance.

"The first butterfly!" exclaimed Mrs. Kington. "Omen number one! Wish! It means we shall come back with Marcus's treasure. But it will be splendid fun. The yacht's a dream. I saw her at Cowes last summer. I shall have to get some clothes, worse luck. I haven't a rag that will do."

"You might get some hints for clothes out of the *Pirates of Penzance*," suggested Norbert, bent on raising the dust they were wont to breathe.

"That unfortunately was before my time," replied Mrs. Kington, mendaciously.

"Ladies wear the fewest possible clothes (if any) on desert islands," he retorted. "Remember you have a part to keep up."

And as they chatted they made their way to where the car was waiting, and discovered the leathern-clad driver on a bank of primroses smoking a cigarette.

Then, as they prepared to start, Norbert heard all that there was to hear of the cruise.

The mystery, he said, was worthy of them! They were going to look for something which had never been buried, on the authority of a musical comedy pirate! To be in perfect harmony with the magic enterprise they ought to commission the phantom ship out of Wagner's "Flying Dutchman." However, no doubt a band would be provided.

But Mrs. Kington protested. They weren't doing justice to Marcus. Marcus, at all events, was real enough. Besides, there really was a chart or something. An interviewer had been allowed a glimpse of

it. He said it was drawn in pale red ink, the colour of faded blood! In any case if there wasn't something in it Marcus would never have gone in for it. Bob—Bob was Mr. Kingston—would have given anything to be asked. Bob, who wasn't quite a fool, believed there might be something in it. At any rate it was a jolly idea—especially as the island (she believed it wasn't far from North Africa, but she didn't know much geography) was in a part of the world where the sea was always calm. Probably they should all land and live a few days in tents (on asparagus and strawberries and cream principally, she hoped) while they watched the crew dig for the "buried gold!"

So Mrs. Kingston talked nonsense whilst Norbert encouraged her.

The air, she said, was thick with romance. Did they know that Mrs. Chesterfield intended to write a book about it—if she came back alive? She had already signed a contract with Bilge & Co., the publishers, and received a cheque in advance, for she was an awfully shrewd woman. It would come in so useful if she were drowned, she said; she hadn't told Marcus about it yet, but intended dedicating it to him. So they chatted in the soft evening light till the chauffeur, who, with some difficulty, had turned his car by backing into a rough field where some mares were grazing, signified his readiness to start.

The ladies mounted. The car crepitated with pent-up energies, emitted a warning blast, dashed off and disappeared behind the trees, leaving a trail of dust and the taint of its infected breath. Norbert listened until its conquering buzz was lost in the distance, and all became still again in the wood save for the happy thrushes and the forlorn nightingale.

CHAPTER XV

THE morning after the visit to Quirl, Marcus Hart, as previously arranged, lunched with Mrs. Kington, Emilia Arden being the other guest.

Mrs. Kington was as interested in what she saw "going on"—and "going on" in her vocabulary covered the widest and slickest range of observation—as was Mrs. Chesterfield, of whom Mrs. Kington was beginning to suspect that Mr. Hart "had had pretty nearly enough." She meant, of course, in an advisory capacity.

Emilia's management of Hart struck Mrs. Kington as "masterly," possibly because she only saw the superficial results. To conduct a "semi-engagement" with a man of Hart's oppressive calibre and forego none of the freedom which relative betrothals exact, appeared to this most modern lady a triumph of feminine diplomacy. She constantly discussed it with her husband, who could throw no light on it beyond suggesting that Emilia was taking Hart on approval. It was, he understood, a new system in commerce, and there was no reason why it shouldn't be applied by business people to what people of sentiment described as "the affairs of the heart!" The contract on both sides, in his opinion, demanded extraordinary preliminary precautions. So far as Mr. Kington ventured to guess, Hart knew "what he was up to," and that was more than he dared say of Miss Arden. Personally, he had no idea what she was driving at.

This conversation had occurred when Mrs. Kington desired her husband to lunch out, because Marcus Hart and Emilia were coming to talk over the arrangements about the cruise.

"Why on earth Hart is inviting Norbert," observed

Mr. Kington, who had obediently elected to take a day off at golf, "is beyond me, unless he means to drop him overboard to get rid of him!"

"We made him," replied his wife a little doubtfully. "Captain Norbert goes officially as ex-secretary."

"Nonsense," replied he. "Hart had much better take me."

Then Mr. Kington departed, and an hour after he had left his house Emilia Arden entered it.

Kington was a sleeping partner in a great firm of brewers, the head of which, his late great uncle, had been made a peer for the usual reasons at the end of the Crimean war. The world moves so rapidly now, that even some of those who ought to have known better already confused the Kingtons with the extinct noble family whose name the brewing ancestor had thoughtfully revived. For this and other reasons they were people whom, at the opening of his fashionable campaign, Marcus Hart had thought it worth his while to cultivate. Moreover, he liked, as he said, "seeing how things were done," especially when he knew, as he did in the Kingtons' case, how much it was "done on," consequently he was frequently met in the drawing-room of their attractive house just off North Audley Street, and had been, on their recommendation, invited to shoot at the pheasants in the famous coverts at Attacre Park, where Lord Attacre, the head of this ancient beer dynasty, dispensed hospitality to the right people.

Emilia had walked across from Sloane Street after an unpleasant discussion with her mother, whose mind what she described with pardonable vigour as her daughter's caprices had not a little troubled. The cause of the dispute, of course, was Emilia's "indiscreet" visit to Quirl. Mrs. Arden felt that time was being wasted and unnecessary risk incurred, although in the present state of tension she deemed it wiser not to say so, for she could not forget how, in a spurt of temper, Emilia told her that if she married Mr. Hart, it would be to please her relations.

"The man is so patient and long-suffering," murmured the harassed lady to herself, determined to place him in the kindest of lights, "that I've no patience with the ill-natured people who pretend he's a sort of Bluebeard!"

This thought held her mind as Emilia left the flat. It continued till the whirl of the lift ceased. It was followed by another. What was the meaning of this intrigue on the part of the committee of this ridiculous club to induce Mr. Hart to invite Arthur Norbert? She would have written to Captain Norbert to inform him that, under the circumstances, she should consider it in the worst taste if he went, only she had consulted her cousin, the duchess, who had declared that she didn't consider it "nice" to entrust all those women to Mr. Hart without a decent man to keep an eye on him!

In fact, what a few weeks ago had appeared a golden prospect, quite simple and easy, now seemed to the perplexed lady a subject possibly concealing acute disappointment. She looked, however, to the cruise, which Mr. Hart had privately informed her had been principally arranged to gratify her daughter, to place things on what she described as "a rational footing."

As Emilia walked to North Audley Street,* after succeeding in forgetting that she had deceived her mother, she began to consider what she should say to Mr. Hart, whose smiling silence made her uneasy. She had, she knew, done many things which he had every right to resent. After he had invited the members of the committee "to join him on the cruise, in order," as he continued, in words attributed to him by an interviewer, "that the club might be thoroughly represented and his yacht be made a dazzling centre of loveliness and wit," Emilia, on her side, had commenced to take measures which a charitable psychologist might have attributed to the unconscious action of the instinct of self-preservation. "If Arthur doesn't go," she told herself, "I won't!" The simple alternative was to be ill at the last moment.

Now it chanced that the committee generally had privately expressed the opinion that it would be quite possible "to have too much Marcus!" It was, they thought, a pity that one or two really nice men were not invited. They were such a heap of women! With these vaguely expressed grounds of complaint to build upon, Emilia set to work. She told Lady Horham that Mrs. Tracy and Mrs. Mundsley both thought that the late secretary should be asked to come; she induced Mrs. Tracy and Mrs. Mundsley to imagine that the idea had originated with Lady Horham, whilst Mrs. Kington, admitted into the secret, vigorously encouraged it.

This desire having once taken shape, soon grew to resemble quite a reasonable demand. The consequence was that Mrs. Chesterfield was finally requested to suggest that it would be a gratifying compliment on the part of the new secretary to the club to request its amiable predecessor to join the party. This view the Duchess of Evesham, on being consulted, also encouraged. Somewhat to the surprise of the members, however, Hart replied that nothing would give him greater pleasure, only he was quite sure that Captain Norbert wouldn't come.

"I can't, deaf ladies, expose myself to a refusal on the part of a gentleman who most certainly has not gone out of his way to be agreeable to me," said Hart, when the question was openly discussed at a committee meeting which Emilia did not attend. "But," he continued, "if Captain Norbert will express the wish to be asked, I shall have pleasure in asking him. Then the club would be completely represented, and that, I well know, is the reason guiding your wishes!"

That he had let them down very gently was the general feeling of the committee.

Thus it came to pass that Emilia was requested to use her efforts to induce Captain Norbert to come, and Mrs. Kington was asked to support her. So the two ladies set out on their quest, Orson, as Mrs. Kington remarked (Orson was her latest nickname

for Hart) lending a 60 h.p. Panhard to convey the message to the absent Valentine.

Emilia, however, knowing that Hart was too cunning to be deceived, was convinced he knew the demand for Captain Norbert originated with her.

What did it mean? Hart just now seemed ominously magnanimous. His "generosity and patience," which her mother too frequently proclaimed, Emilia was forced to admit. But Marcus was not the sort of knight who sets out to win his lady by gracious acts and gentle deeds. Rather was he of the domineering black-browed type, which bids truculently for the white slave in the market-place. Why then had he allowed her to drive him so far? Were her tactics as obscure to him as his to her?

What was brooding behind that vehement flamboyant surface—"the buy-you-all-up-and-think-nothing-of-it" manner that Arthur Norbert derided? There were nervous moments when her quick imagination pictured him—as it pictured him now—as a couchant beast preparing for a spring.

But when she reached Mrs. Kington's cool and fragrant room, that lady's cheerful vivacity soon restored her courage. Gertie Kington always got what she wanted and did as she liked, and Emilia believed that she was at least as capable and determined as her friend. She forgot, however, for the moment, that the latter was the much-spoiled wife of an amiable minor magnate closely allied to the cloud-compelling beer dynasty of Attacre. The elder lady sat enthroned in regions the younger had not yet entered.

But Mrs. Kington knew that Emilia had wept when she saw Arthur Norbert, she knew that she had come away rejoicing, yet nothing between them, so far as she knew, was changed. She admired Emilia, but found her very difficult to understand.

"I wish you had come a little sooner, Emilia," she began; "Bob—whom I've sent off to golf—was quite spiteful about Mr. Hart. Orson, he declares, means to scuttle the ship with Valentine and all his admirers

on board! He says he's tempted to let the underwriters know—whoever they are!"

"The people who insure ships," replied Emilia, probably with the object of escaping criticism behind a simple statement of fact. It produced a temporary effect, for the conversation turned to the subject of the yacht, its accommodation, and the brief duration of the cruise.

"Orson won't let us bring maids," said Mrs. Kington, "not that mine would be much good at sea—but he has borrowed some stewardesses from the Black Star Line. We're to have half-a-one each, so I suppose we shall have some one to brush our hair occasionally. And, Emilia! I suppose if the weather's rough, Orson will take care that we get into port. I understand he's very precious about his yacht."

"I wish you wouldn't call him Orson!" exclaimed Emilia.

"Why not? He doesn't mind. We've all nicknames. You're the 'Pretty Vixen,' why, I don't know—for you're not a bit sly. I'm the 'Jay,' because they pretend I chatter; then Arthur Norbert, of course, is Valentine to balance Orson. There isn't a single, leading Enlightener without a nickname! Besides, Marcus hasn't the slightest idea what Orson means. If he had, he'd shave his eyebrows."

Emilia was painfully aware of the eyebrows.

For a moment each of the young women thought a little apprehensively of those menacing appendages to the beady eyes of their future host. After a pause, as evidence possibly of a nature more agreeable than it looked, Mrs. Kington observed that all the same it was very nice of Marcus to let Captain Norbert come. "You know, dear, why they say he does?" she added.

"Who is 'they'?" Emilia inquired.

"Well, Mrs. Chesterfield. But I'm awfully glad he is coming. He's the sort of man who makes things seem so safe, doesn't he?"

Mrs. Kington was seeking the sentimental confidence which she felt was due. It was not forthcoming.

"Arthur Norbert has known me all his life. Of course I wanted him to come," was all she got.

"I must say, Emilia," insisted the other pettishly, "that you seemed overjoyed about it yesterday."

The conversation at this point was interrupted by the arrival of a packet of books from the circulating library. Behind these and their merits Emilia took refuge till Marcus arrived.

When the servant announced him, they were both conscious of a change in his face, and both became simultaneously aware that it was due to some depilatory operation performed apparently on his brows. Both blushed, and poor Mrs. Kington wished she had never called him "Orson." "What a silly little fool I am!" she thought; "he'll never forgive me."

To relieve her feelings and soothe her conscience, she loosed all her sweetest flatteries, but without the courage to meet his eyes.

They had had such a delightful spin on his delicious "buzzer" yesterday! It had been perfectly angelic of him to lend it; people were so precious about their cars as a rule.

"And Arthur's roads are the worst in the world!" added Emilia with an air of candour, calling forth the other young woman's admiration.

But Marcus remained unshakable behind the mantle of his jolly manner. "Glad you had a pleasant spin—what? That Panhard's a ripping car, though I say it, who shouldn't. But how about our young friend, will he honour us?"

Emilia did not quail.

"He would like to come immensely," she said; "who wouldn't? The only difficulty is that he must take up his duties at the War Office on the 27th of next month—three weeks after the day we're supposed to sail—and of course we couldn't give him the exact dates."

"We shall be back again quite a week before the 27th. Of course, under the circumstances, we'd make a point of that," replied Hart. "But I'll write and tell Norbert so."

"How sweet of you, Mr. Hart!" exclaimed Mrs. Kington, "for we all want him to come. You see, he has been so mixed up with the committee, and it will be quite charming to have both our secretaries to look after us, and ever so much nicer for you. Seven women are too much for any man!"

Marcus laughed his rollicking laugh without conveying the impression of amiable buoyancy its loudness strove to advertise.

"My dear lady, how many virgins are there?" he asked.

"Upon my word, Mr. Hart, I'm not sure," replied Mrs. Kington, bent on encouraging his assumed humour.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Marcus, this time a degree nearer nature; "you mistake me—you do, indeed, what?" Here he turned a rolling eye on Emilia. "I wasn't thinking of our committee, but of the wise and foolish virgins whose number I forget. Well, I think I may say without boasting, that I'm capable of acting as host to the whole lot of them!"

"Once aboard the lugger' and the whole lot are yours, Mr. Hart, eh?" smiled back the anxious Mrs. Kington, still bent on obliterating the memory of Orson.

"That's it," said Marcus, "what?"

"In any case we shall have no foolish virgins on board this trip," she continued with the same softening object in view; "our combined wisdom will frighten away the demons guarding your treasure. You'll find us most helpful."

"What shall you really do if you find something?" asked Emilia.

"Altenstein, who was dining with me last night," replied Marcus, "says if we don't bring back something we must pretend we have, and endow a charity

with it. If not, the club won't stand the strain. You see the papers are giving us such a send-off! I'm fairly besieged by 'em—the reporters, I mean."

"And you've said such charming things about us too," intervened Mrs. Kington. "We're such 'a dazzling centre of loveliness and wit!' I blushed with honest pride when I read it, I did indeed, Mr. Hart!"

"The chaps do pile it on a bit. It's their trade, I suppose. In the excitement of the moment I probably said something like it. They lead you on, you know."

And so they skirmished (the ladies nervously) on the fringes of the matter nearest their minds, Hart collecting venom, Emilia strengthening her purpose, Mrs. Kington congratulating herself on being in the latest thing in adventurous smartness.

Whenever she drove down Piccadilly and the contents' bill of the evening papers fluttered such messages to her as "Smart Treasure Hunters" or "A Millionaire's New Treasure Island," she thrilled with satisfaction. Meanwhile Hart's assumed air of benevolent possession suggesting claims on Emilia magnanimously deferred but never forgotten and unlikely to be relinquished, impressed her, not quite cheerfully, as one of those comedies impossible under the serener middle-class skies from which her marriage had removed her. The audacities of the newer region fascinated her. The simple problems of her younger days, where the lines between honour and dishonour were clearly fixed, seemed flat and commonplace in comparison. Watch as she might, she could not decide for what Emilia was manœuvring.

Marcus made himself as agreeable as he could during lunch. His plans were fixed and his victims unconscious, so the ingratiating side of him—which the Enlighteners called the generous side—came quite easily to the surface. As Mrs. Kington watched him surreptitiously, even the thinned eyebrows (the operation, she fancied, must have been quite painful)

appeared to her merely a blameless effort to win the favour of the world in which she claimed a pleasant seat. "It would be," she thought, "a horrid thing to be out of it!" She even forgave herself for having called him "Orson." "It made him see," she reflected, "and like a wise man he took the hint. I would do the same myself, if necessary!" But a flattering mirror met her eyes. Her own brows were beautifully arched. Her eyes shone beneath them like "limpid stars of candour." Some man had once called them "limpid stars of candour." The compliment struck her as true though far-fetched. Since then she had cultivated the look.

When lunch was over, Emilia agreed that Mr. Hart should drive her home. Marcus said he should like to reassure Mrs. Arden about the cruise. She was naturally a bit anxious. The newspapers were rotting so awfully about it. Why they couldn't let people play their own little game without screaming about it was more than Marcus could understand!

Mrs. Kingston opined that they did it to sell the papers, Emilia attributed it to Sir Japhet Cuddy Hill, the big newspaper proprietor whom Mr. Hart had brought to the meeting; Mr. Hart protested that, if that were so, Sir Japhet had been guilty of a breach of confidence. But, since they had taken it up, Marcus had thought it worth while to try and help 'em pitch it in the right note.

"It's rather a shrill note," Emilia observed. *The Trumpet* called us 'new sirens' the other day. You they likened to Ulysses, Mr. Hart."

"Perhaps that was a little thick," assented Mr. Hart cautiously, to whom Ulysses was a name. "Still we can't expect 'em to be quite free from errors of taste."

"It's to be hoped we shan't discover Calypso on board," said Mrs. Kingston; but her joke, such as it was, fell flat, for Mr. Hart blankly "hoped not" without laughing, and Emilia pretended not to see the allusion.

"That's the worst of Marcus," reflected Mrs. Kington after he and Emilia had left, "he's so very limited, and never picks up anything unless it's useful. Poor Emilia! I wonder what he's telling her and how she's taking it."

Meanwhile Emilia, in Marcus's shining and almost noiseless landaulette, which had already entered the park, was taking it very quietly, although his big thick-set body seemed to drive her further than was necessary to the other side of the carriage.

"This new buzzer runs a treat, don't she?" said Marcus, who never forgot to praise his own belongings if they deserved it.

Emilia praised the car, and then, after a slight pause, thanked him for inviting Captain Norbert.

"There isn't the slightest reason why he shouldn't come if he wants to," said Hart. "Although you didn't ask, I knew it was you who wanted him. Quite natural of you, my dear girl. You don't suppose I want you to chuck your old friends! Norbert don't love me. Why should he? But I think it won't be a bad thing for him and me to get to understand each other better."

Here they glided into Grosvenor Place, where the policeman stopped them, and the landaulette purred in the pride of its pent-up energies. Two young men, acquaintances of Emilia and Norbert, bowed from the Piccadilly pavement.

"I think we understand one another, Emilia," said Hart.

"I hope we do," she replied resolutely.

"It will be time enough to announce our engagement after the cruise is over," said Marcus, edging towards her till his short thick legs almost pressed her skirts. "I'm an indulgent chap—they all say so. Looked at in certain lights, I might be mistaken for a bit of a fool. Still, as *you* know, I'm always ready to pay my price to gratify the whims of those I'm fond of, because, my dear, I know that my reward will come. A man can't do without a wife, nor a

woman of the right sort without a husband. "When you come to see things a bit plainer you'll see I'm the right man for you. This waiting, my dear, meanwhile's pretty hard on me."

But the policeman raised his hand, the tide of traffic rolled westward again, Marcus's motor rushing neatly ahead.

Emilia shrunk further from him.

"What! ain't I to make love to you then?" he asked, seeing the message behind her movement.

"No," she said; "remember our agreement at the Grange. I hate this sort of thing, and you know I hate it."

Marcus looked grim. The physical aversion with which he knew that he inspired her only made him long more passionately to punish and conquer. He had lately bought in Paris a new picture for his smoking-room. It represented a satyr on the point of seizing a fleeing nymph. He had chosen the picture partly because he imagined that the nymph was like Emilia, but chiefly because it encouraged him in his pursuit, symbolizing his purpose as it were.

"I shall have to teach you to like it, my dear," he said, glaring at her.

"Not before you have my permission," she answered. "If you do I won't come on this trip, and——"

But he stopped her before she finished.

"Forgive me," he said; "when I see you my blood makes me forget. I'm only human and you're very lovely. I'll stand by our compact. Girls are not easy to understand, Emilia! Apparently you don't know what you want. Poor Marcus must wait till you discover. Meanwhile he's miserable without you. But here we are! I promise you I'll try to be a good boy!"

He gave her a sentimental leer as his footman opened the door. Then they mounted by the lift to her mother's flat.

Marcus always presented himself with a feeling of satisfaction in Mrs. Arden's drawing-room. Whatever

Emilia might think of him, there could be no doubt of the mother's purpose. This was incense to his pride. The one half atoned for the offence of the other.

Then Emilia saw Marcus's manner change. He became the carpet knight! With her he had been perfectly natural. The mixture of desire and hate with which she inspired him swept off his cheap veneer when they were alone. She heard him tell her mother that the cruise meant ten days' dead calm in summer seas. He was not going to please himself, but—here he glanced at Emilia—but because it would give pleasure to his guests.

The last time he had seen Mrs. Arden he had said, "The whole thing's got up for Emilia, dear lady. If we've thrown in a fairy tale for her amusement, perhaps we'll be forgiven for it!"

"I hear, too, Mr. Hart," observed Mrs. Arden with an almost imperceptible tremour of nervousness in her voice, "that you've asked Captain Norbert."

"I thought Emilia would like an old friend on board. We can't hope to quite monopolize her—yet, Mrs. Arden!"

But Emilia, with her eyes fixed on the cluster of wallflowers in a piece of venetian glass before her, seemed scarcely to hear. Her "facial control," as her mother said, "was quite wonderful."

"Arthur is such an old friend of ours, poor fellow," said Mrs. Arden apologetically. "But I'm rather surprised he can find time now."

"We are to be back ever so long before his duties begin at the War Office," said Emilia; "it will be pleasant to have him on board."

"Yes," said Mr. Hart, "we shall be a very merry party on board, and *The Dawn* is to have a new skipper in honour of the occasion."

That evening Marcus wrote to Norbert inviting him to join the party, giving the dates of starting and return. "The ladies seem keen on having you on 'the lugger,' (to call his splendid steam yacht 'the lugger' was one of Marcus's portly jokes), "and there's nothing

I wouldn't do to gratify them the dears. Wire me word if you can come. Time is pressing."

On the following morning Marcus's valet handed him the reply in bed. "Accept with pleasure," said the telegram.

Then Marcus gave one of his peculiar rolls of the head, followed by a snort—the latter phenomenon he attributed to "gout in the throat"—and muttered aloud, "I've got the whole boiling of them, and I'll see they enjoy it."

Then he lay back on his pillows thinking, but it was not until he had steamed himself in an elaborate bath—Marcus was great on baths—that the thought "what an artist I am!" flashed on him. He further reflected regretfully that none of the huzzies would ever know that!

Afterwards at breakfast, consisting of a sole impeccably grilled, Marcus read the morning's sheaf of press-cuttings commenting on his coming cruise. A remarkable institution, the press! he thought. The public would be less interested if he were about to bring back the North Pole! There was nothing a man of brains couldn't do! All this boom from Low's little practical joke! Marcus generally managed to go one better. In his pride he swallowed the last mouthful without biting it.

CHAPTER XVI

"THE Ænlighteners and their leader"—to quote the report of the *Daily Trumpet*, Sir Japhet Cuddy Hill's enterprising "organ of opinion," "assembled at Waterloo Station at ten o'clock this morning, a large crowd of friends being present to see them off." The *Trumpet* proceeded to give the names of the "gallant millionaire's" guests, a description of the bouquets carried by the seven ladies, and of the charmingly decorated saloon carriage hitched on to a boat express for their convenience. •

"Never," exclaimed the report, "since the rape of the Sabines did so much beauty start on an expedition into the unknown, before! Prominent among the ladies was the beautiful Miss Arden (cousin of the Duchess of Evesham) in a smart blue serge yachting dress. Then there was the brilliant Mrs. Chesterfield, who, it is whispered, promises to tell to the world, under the auspices of Bilge and Co., the stirring account of the treasure-search. Mrs. Kington, the pretty and witty niece of Lord Attacre, looked radiant. Into whatever group she stayed to chat, her arrival was followed by a ripple of laughter. Both Mrs. Tracy and Mrs. Mundsley, brides of a year's standing, looked grave. Their touching farewells, however, added the necessary note of gentle melancholy to a thrilling scene. The *New Argonaut* is mainly manned by ladies! six of whom leave strong domestic ties behind them. To those pessimists who deplore the decay of pluck and energy among the upper classes, surely this is sufficient answer. What smart ladies' club in France or

Germany, if any exist, would contain members spirited enough to forego the comforts of their homes, and stoical enough to abandon the frivolous amusements of their class at the call of an exciting adventure? Such a phenomenon makes us realize the imperial spirit of our race. Such women as these are fit mothers of our empire builders."

There were two other robust paragraphs on the same heroic scale, which, as none of the ladies were blessed with offspring except Lady Horham, whose son was a lieutenant in the Rifle Brigade, were to a certain extent wasted.

"Mr. Marcus Hart," continued the *Trumpet* reporter, "was everywhere at once, and with a cheery word for all. His arrangements for the comfort and convenience of his guests we need scarcely say are on a princely scale. 'The new Jason,' as some of his friends now call him (the Enlighteners, as is well known, are quite famous for their witty pet-names), is worthy to lead the beautiful New Argonauts. He will be well supported by that able if unsuccessful politician and gallant soldier, Captain Norbert, who expects to be back just in time to take up his new duties as secretary of the latest thing in military commissions. The train steamed out of the station amid the ringing cheers of a very smart crowd. The last words uttered were of a dramatic nature, and will not easily be forgotten. 'Mind you bring it back, old chap!' exclaimed the Baron Altenstein playfully to Mr. Hart, who was waving his hand to a group of friends, as the train slowly moved from the platform—'Mind you bring it back!' 'You bet!' replied the gallant fellow. 'We've not gone for nothing.'"

And this represented the outward and visible sign of the departure, but there was an inner and less buoyant side felt by at least five of the travellers in the flower-decorated saloon.

The only lady who had not yet penetrated beneath the surface was Mrs. Upperton—daughter of the famous but unfortunate Irish sportsman, the late

Lora Barrythorn. She had married the wealthy descendant of a popular shaving-soap proprietor who had recently died and left her a fortune. Polly Upperton—the “Polly” was deemed necessary for identification—was often described as the most popular widow in London. Lord Barrythorn, who was killed in the hunting-field in Ireland, was reported to have “nearly married the Duchess of Evesham” when she was the beautiful Miss Arden. This may have accounted for her grace’s friendship for his daughter. When, therefore, Mrs. Field was compelled by her husband, Colonel Field, to resign the club and relinquish her place on the committee, the duchess had expressed a wish that Polly Upperton should succeed to it. There was no domineering strait-laced evangelical husband in Mrs. Upperton’s case to cast doubts on “The Enlighteners’” fair fame by compelling his wife to resign membership on the grounds that no self-respecting woman could associate herself with so frivolous, godless, and useless an institution. Moreover, Polly Upperton’s long purse, high spirits, original character, and not too much discredited reputation well fitted her for the vacant place. Consequently she was elected, to her great satisfaction, and “added” to the committee, as Lady Horham happily remarked, “an element of Irish humour which it had hitherto lacked.”

When the train steamed out of the station, all the ladies, except Mrs. Tracy and Mrs. Mundsley, who, as some one mischievously had informed the reporters, were suspected of being in love with their husbands, began to chatter eagerly, possibly to smother their misgivings. For it was, as Lady Horham admitted, “a little like a jump into the dark, and no one could be quite sure the sea would be calm !”, Mrs. Kington and Mrs. Mundsley, to ease such doubts as these, questioned Norbert. Did he think it would be all right?—“the weather and all that,” they meant. “Can you doubt the elegant probity of Mr. Hart’s promises?” he inquired.

"We ask for comfort, Captain Norbert, and you give us a joke at the expense of our host!" said Mrs. Mundsley reproachfully.

"I give you the best I have," returned Norbert. "Even our host can't control the weather in the Bay of Biscay. I wish he could!"

"That awful bay!" exclaimed Mrs. Kingdon. "Must we cross it?"

Hart cast an inquiring eye at this group, suspecting a hostile purpose whenever the ladies gathered round Norbert. Mrs. Chesterfield, who knew this, offered solace. Some of the others, she explained, were nervous about the bay. Captain Norbert, who had often crossed it, was teasing them about it. Besides, they had no idea where they were going, and were afraid the weather might be stormy, and all of them had not Mrs. Chesterfield's confidence in her host.

"Tell 'em they'll be all right when I get 'em aboard the 'lugger,'" Marcus replied, who never tired of his own little jokes.

But to reassure them he handed round sweetmeats in a box of such consummate attractions that not one of his guests could resist the temptation, although it still wanted an hour to noon.

Outside the sun was shining on the spring world. When the train stopped a moment by a patch of rolling common-land, bright with the yellow furze-flowers and beautiful with two thorn trees in bloom, they heard the cuckoo call, and smelt the waft of the May through the carriage window.

"Who knows when we shall hear that again?" asked Mrs. Tracy of Mrs. Mundsley.

"Or smell the May again?" murmured her friend.

But the train rushed on again across the pleasant English landscape, on a journey which so many exiles remember as their last glimpse of home, past meadow and woodland, past grazing sheep and pensive kine, outstripping the insect-chasing swallow, till the sea shone gaily in the distance, and the squalid mud flats, with their crop of skeleton barges and dreary naval

derelicts, warned them that the end of their journey was approaching.

By four o'clock all were aboard *The Dawn*—"a miracle of maritime luxury and the shipbuilder's art," to quote the reporters. A matchless lunch "deified," as Mrs. Chesterfield wrote in her note book, "by priceless champagne" had lifted their equanimity to the side of elation. Moreover, all the arrangements, as Lady Horham (an authority on arrangements) declared, were beyond criticism. Flowers scented every cabin; the saloon, to quote Mrs. Chesterfield once more, "was a dream of roses and azaleas in pots."

Congratulated on all sides—for nothing reassures the doubts of the luxurious so much as luxury—Marcus admitted that it was not half bad, but he took care that his people were properly trained.

Norbert sat at one end of the table at luncheon, Marcus at the other, with Emilia on his right and Lady Horham on his left. Obeying an ironical suggestion of Norbert, Polly Upperton had playfully protested. There must be no favouritism among the new Argonauts. The places of honour were of course on the right and left of their leader. These, in future, they must either scramble for, raffle for, or enjoy in rotation!

This proposal, which amused the ladies, secretly irritated Hart, who retorted in his heavy jocular vein. It was unfair to disparage by comparison Norbert's end of the table, because he (Marcus) was nominal host, since he was persuaded that most of his guests would prefer the conversation of his gallant colleague to his. To this Norbert promptly replied that, to prevent jealousy, heart-burning and disappointment, and endow dinner with the element of, he trusted, a not displeasing uncertainty, he proposed the seven ladies' seats should be numbered and drawn for every evening. That simple method, Norbert believed, would protect their host from the embarrassment to which a noble hospitality sometimes exposes itself,

and at the same time afforded every lady at lunch that opportunity of dividing her favours between their present and former secretary with the discretion which he regarded as the birthright of every Enlightener!

Norbert's speech, which still further annoyed Hart, was rapturously received by the ladies, put to the vote and carried, Mrs. Chesterfield alone dissenting on the grounds that they had no right to apply club rules on board, and that she deemed it fairer to give their host the right of selection, since he was the last man to exercise it invidiously.

By this time they were leaving the Needles behind them; the ghostly chalk pillars lifted their pale heads out of a green sea, a long slow swell was rolling in, by tea time half the Argonauts were languishing in their cabins, and the spirited discussion on the right to seats seemed as foolish and far away as the quarrels of the frogs and the mice—for such is the magic of the sea!

CHAPTER XVII

ON the following day, however, having rounded Ushant and steamed into the bay, they entered a zone of complete calm and cloudless skies. The stewardesses were busy unpacking trunks, an awning was spread over the spotless deck, ports were opened, gentle airs swayed the flowers of the azaleas and fluttered the petals of the roses on the thick carpets, and the ladies re-appeared after their, in all cases not necessary seclusion, to face their duties, in blue or white serges and neat yachting caps and white shoes, for it was the badge of an Enlightener to be perfectly dressed for her part. There had been a preliminary discussion between them, held in a beautiful room off the saloon, which had been set aside for their convenience—a wonderful boudoir, decorated in white and gold, and furnished with ingenious arm-chairs and couches adjustable to the movements of the yacht. Here the thud of the screw entered as a remote murmur that vexed not the most sensitive organization, so entirely had luxury claimed it for its own. It was here that they decided to ask Marcus to make the further disclosures that he had promised. They had been twenty-four hours at sea, and it was time they knew something of his plans. There was something uncanny, Lady Horham averred, in being at sea, even in *The Dawn*, and not knowing where you were going.

Through the open ports they beheld the bay stretching away to the horizon in mingling circles of blues and greens, islanded here and there by shades of purple or, where the soft west breeze stirred the surface more freely, by patches of chillier grey.

Overhead they heard Norbert's step as he paced the deck. Hart had found himself incapable of enjoying his colleague's society, nor had Norbert helped him to cross the gulf of enmity which, now quite naturally, seemed to separate them. They were watching each other through a thin veil of casual politeness.

Before leaving the deck to confer with his skipper, Hart had said to Norbert, "I suppose they'll want to know where we're bound to."

"Quite a healthy curiosity on their part, too," replied Norbert.

"D——n his supercilious manner!" reflected Hart.

Then, emitting his peculiar grunt which made itself audible as a combined effort of the back of his nose and the vocal muscles, Marcus sought the society of Captain West—a silent, red-nosed man who so far had shown no desire to gossip with his owner's guests. When Norbert had asked him what he thought of *The Dawn* he had answered cautiously that she seemed a fine boat, but that he was not yet prepared to express an opinion. His manner struck Norbert as that of a very unimaginative man who, ordered by his owner "to hold his tongue," clumsily interpreted his instructions.

Left to himself, Norbert walked the deck. The air and sea were radiant, the sun warm, beautiful gulls, on swift dove-coloured wings edged with black, were following the yacht or, darting down into the troubled water in her wake, tossed in the amber foam of the furrow.

The beauty of ocean and sky, the bitter-sweet airs stirring under the blue vault, vibrating with sunlight and refracted sea-gleams, moved him with a buoyancy that even his doubts and self-disapproval could not stifle. He was undepressed, as it were, in spite of himself. To none of the questions which had risen in his mind since he had come on board could he find an answer. What did the cruise mean? Did this preposterous treasure-hunt represent merely one of

those wild attempts at originality of conduct suggested by restless vanity, rabid for advertisement, or did it conceal a sinister purpose behind its absurdity? Lust of notoriety, on the whole, best explained the man's conduct to Norbert. Coarse shrewdness has often a side of limitless conceit. The newspapers have taught the vulgarest souls to wallow in vulgar publicity. But was Hart merely wallowing? Did he ask nothing of all these organized flourishes but fulsome or satirical paragraphs in the newspapers?

Then, turning from Hart's conduct, Norbert surveyed his own. The wise course, discovered too late, becomes a reproach. The course Norbert ought to have adopted now seemed plain. All his influence should have been exerted to prevent Emilia from going on the cruise. He had discovered from Mrs. Tracy, Mrs. Kington and Mrs. Mundsley that she had determined not to go unless he came too. Why had she trapped him, and why, in his heart, did he forgive her for trapping him? Here again he was groping in dark places, but not resentfully. At the same time it helped him to understand why Hart had invited him. A pleasant position for a man this! With a little more energy and decision of character he might have clipped the wings of the absurd advertisement on which Hart had flapped his way across the astonishment of the public. The man, in fact, had acquired a certain prestige by Norbert's countenance. One of the papers, he remembered (Mrs. Upperton had shown it to him on the journey down to Southampton), had said that, unless there were something in the treasure-hunt, Captain Norbert, who had been just appointed Secretary to the new Military Commission, would have had nothing to do with the affair! Whatever it might be for Hart, for him, as a soldier, the business was anything but a good advertisement! He had simply come because Emilia Arden asked him, and, so far as there was an object beyond yielding to claims which he had no right to encourage, it represented one more step

towards rendering her marriage with Hart impossible. When he surveyed his conduct as a man of the world, it seemed pitiful, if not contemptible, but regarded in the light of his emotions it looked inevitable.

Whilst these thoughts were increasing his contempt and dislike for Hart, as the current of uneasy reflection brushed round him, the ladies trooped on deck in all the enjoyment of radiant weather and restored comfort.

"Aren't we a splendid lot of sailorwomen—all on our sea-legs again?" exclaimed Mrs. Kington, who led the way.

"Most perfect of sea-nymphs," he replied, "you've charmed the winds to sleep!"

But the ladies were serious. Elated by the radiant weather, they had decided to claim their rights. Gathering in a group round Norbert, they told him that they had decided that he should request Mr. Hart to take them entirely into his confidence, and "lay before them" the complete information to which, as members of the committee, they were entitled.

"I think, Captain Norbert," said Lady Horham, "that we are not only within our rights but also perfectly business-like!"

But Norbert was amused. Around and above were ocean, sky and wandering sea-birds—nature in her simplest and most elemental form; measured by this contrast the collective fragments of human artificiality disturbing the blind and contemptuous serenity with the twitterings of an irrational and tireless vanity, seemed to shrink to the proportions of an unburst bubble. How easily might the first engulf the last, and nothing be lost that the world would miss. This thought absorbed him for a moment, and he looked at Lady Horham's complacent face without replying.

"Would you rather not tell Marcus?" asked Mrs. Kington, misreading his expression. "Would you?"

"You see, Marcus might fancy we were dictating," suggested Mrs. Chesterfield. "After all, it *is* his yacht!"

"I talked over the matter with Hart last night and this morning," said Norbert. "He had to keep the name of his magic island secret (I dare say it will turn out to be the sister isle to Monte Cristo's!) because, if its latitude and longitude had been made known, he was afraid it would be snapped up by one of the Kaiser's cruisers for a German colony. But now we are beyond these risks Hart will reveal his tremendous secret after lunch!"

"But do you really think there's nothing in it?" Mrs. Tracy asked, disappointedly. "Emilia declares you do."

"Then if I do I ought to have a shot tied to my leg and be dropt overboard for baulking a romance! Some wiseacre says that whatever is thinkable exists somewhere. What better proof of the existence of our treasure island do we want than that?"

The ladies looked less hopeful. They were all very imaginative, and, now the sea was calm, persuaded that "there must be something in it!"

"It isn't kind to pooh-pooh Marcus's treasure island, Captain Norbert, it isn't indeed—especially after he has been put to such tremendous expense to look for it!" Mrs. Chesterfield protested. "I shall make a note of what you say, and when we've found the treasure, Venetian ducats, the spoils of Spanish monasteries, and all the precious things I'm trying to see in my dreams, your want of faith will be greatly to your discredit. The early explorers weren't a bit like you."

"No, I'm a thing of lead and clay weighed down by dullness and pessimism, Mrs. Chesterfield, preparing to thicken down into a musty official, and ready to barter my share in our booty for a cigarette."

"But surely you must admit there's an island," insisted Lady Horham.

"I believe there are several marked on the chart

between the Canaries and the Azores," replied Norbert.

"Then if there's an island why shouldn't there be a treasure?" said some one else.

But they were called to lunch.

"You'll know your chances in a few minutes," said Norbert; "meanwhile let us maintain a respectful demeanour, even if a sell is in store. Hart's capable of 'selling us into slavery' if we interfere with his melodrama."

Then, as they made their way to the saloon, Lady Horham told Mrs. Kington and Mrs. Upperton that they had better sit next to Marcus, whilst Mrs. Chesterfield entreated Emilia not to sit by Captain Norbert, as it would annoy Mr. Hart so dreadfully. To which Emilia replied that she didn't care if she did.

They found Marcus already in the saloon, all his smiles in full blast to welcome his guests, hoping that they had all brought sea-appetites.

Hungry? They were all hungry. The air reeked with the savour of delicate food.

"How thoughtful to give us clear soup!" murmured Mrs. Kington, who, obeying Lady Horham's instructions, had made a rush for a seat next to Marcus.

"The *chef* always does at sea the second day out before appetites are quite on their legs again," said Marcus.

"Quite sweet of him," said Mrs. Kington.

"And then there are *petits poussins*, chick-chickens, our poulterer calls them," observed Mrs. Upperton, who sat on his other side, reading the *menu*.

"My *chef's* At at them," replied Hart. "I got him from Prince Falerno—Jules went round the world with him. Jules' idea of sea-fare is light food and plenty of it. So's mine."

"Hence the *petits poussins*," said Mrs. Upperton.

"Exactly. He has a capital way of doing 'em," continued Hart, who was deeply interested in feeding. "He serves 'em up, as you'll see directly, with a rich

and, delicately flavoured oyster sauce and truffles generously thrown in."

All the guests were now seated, and Marcus, glancing over the *menu*, saw Emilia Arden take her place on Norbert's right.

"Quite in the worst taste!" murmured Mrs. Chesterfield to Lady Horham. But the servants handed round the dishes, the champagne-corks popped, the stream of chatter deepened, flashes from the sea, entering from the port-holes or descending by the open skylights, were reflected in the silver bowls filled with roses.

"What are you so grave for to-day?" asked Emilia, who loved the sea and could live for the moment. "Don't forget this is a holiday. When I woke up this morning—and how I slept!—I remembered we should be back again in a fortnight. Do make the most of it! Lady Horham says you ought to be called 'the melancholy guest!'"

"I've been musing on the lesson of contrasts," said Norbert. "Look out of the port and tell me what you see?"

"A great stretch of heaving blue, and distant greens, here and there a little wrinkle of grey, and—well, that's all, except the dancing sunlight and a faint wreath of smoke on the horizon."

"Now look round and tell me what you see here," he said.

"A lot of people eating more than is good for them and rather flushed from drinking champagne in the middle of the day—the usual thing at luncheon-parties!"

"Well, there's a contrast, isn't there?"

"Yes, but I like it," said she; "it seems so—defiant."

"The victory of man's greedy cunning over nature?" he suggested.

"Yes, something like that."

"You like it?" he repeated.

"Yes, I like it."

"I don't—at least to-day. It disgusts me."

"Do you hate us all so then?"

"No, I only hate one of you!" he answered.

The young woman looked at him. She preferred not to think at that moment.

"You've changed," she said, "since you shut yourself up down at Quirl. They used to call you Mephistopheles at the club, because you were the spirit that mocked. But then your mockeries were all on the surface and hurt no one. Now they seem to come from the depth. Are you sorry I made you come?"

"No, I'm glad. I—but never mind—Hart's on his legs. We are to know our chances and our fate."

Norbert, as vice-chairman, tapped the table for silence; the cigarette-box circulated, the ladies borrowing fire like vestal virgins of the weed, from the silver spirit-lamp of ancient form, which an Egyptian lad handed round with an air of one automatically performing a sacred rite.

"Silence for your secretary, if you please, ladies!" said Norbert.

Marcus, a big cigar between his finger and thumb, bowed.

"It is now time," he said, "that I let you all into the mysteries of our Quest. To-day at twelve o'clock we changed our course; we are now steering straight for the island of San Pedro."

Here Hart stopped, and, turning to his man who stood behind his chair, said, "Get that chart."

In the silence, they could hear the cries of the gulls following the yacht.

The Enlighteners were impressed. None of them had heard of the island of San Pedro.

"Where is it?" whispered Mrs. Mundsley, turning to Norbert.

"Somewhere between the Canary Islands and the Azores," Norbert replied.

"That's it," Hart assented, who heard him. "Nominally San Pedro belongs to Portugal. At one time they are said to have cultivated cochineal on it,

but there is little or no water, for it scarcely ever rains, and has been abandoned for many years."

"That's why the pirates concealed the treasure there, of course," observed Mrs. Chesterfield, anxious to show an intelligent interest on the matter.

"Very possibly," said Hart, a little vaguely.

"What did you say the name was, Captain Norbert?" inquired Mrs. Mundsley. "I never can remember foreign names till I see them printed in a guide book."

"San Pedro formerly; henceforth it shall be known as Cock and Bull Island," he replied. "I merely mention this in my capacity of vice-chairman, lest the romantic fancy of our chairman land us in the sands of disappointment! Our consolation will be that, if we find our treasure-island, we may most appropriately rename what might have been one!"

The ladies, Mrs. Chesterfield especially, cast anxious glances in Norbert's direction. This was the first time on board that the nominal object of the cruise had been derided before Hart's face. Hart, however, apparently absorbed in outspreading the chart which he directed a steward to fasten to the wall, pretended not to hear.

"There," he said, "is San Pedro. This is about where we are now. I calculate, at our present speed of about fourteen knots, that we shall be there in five days."

The ladies gathered round Hart excitedly.

"Well, Mr. Hart?" exclaimed Lady Horham, "and what after that?"

"I've thought that out," replied Marcus, with an air of simple dignity. "The chart of the island which old Gomez bequeathed to me—if a few rough scratchings in faded ink can be called a chart—shows by a cross at the foot of the highest hill where the treasure *ought* to be. But here it is!"

He produced from his pocket an old piece of parchment, and spread it out before him; the others, except Emilia and Norbert, crowded round.

There was nothing very impressive about this mysterious paper, nor was its age apparent. It represented an egg-shaped island with the word "Atalaya" written across a circular patch of shading. Evidently the cartographer was inexperienced, but that, as Mrs. Chesterfield pointed out, only went to prove its genuineness.

"'Atalaya!' what a wonderful word!" exclaimed Mrs. Tracy. "Full of mystery!"

"Means watch-tower," said Hart, who had taken pains to get up his subject. "The treasure's buried at the foot of the Atalaya."

"Just where they would bury it, of course!" exclaimed Mrs. Chesterfield. "This is deeply interesting."

"I've an idea," continued Marcus, "that the place was once used as a burial-ground by the Guanches—the aboriginal inhabitants of the volcanic archipelago with which San Pedro is geographically connected. No doubt that is how the idea of demons occurred to Gomez. I shouldn't be surprised if, in our excavations, we came upon some mummies, because, as you no doubt know, the Guanches were accustomed to embalm their dead."

"Excavations? How delightful it sounds!" murmured Mrs. Chesterfield.

"May I ask then, Mr. Hart, what is the plan of campaign, since we seem getting so warm?" inquired Lady Horham.

"The climate, as I said," continued Marcus, "is practically rainless, but salubrious and bracing, much less enervating than Madeira and cooler far than the Canaries. My idea, with your permission, ladies, is to make our treasure-hunt a glorified picnic and encamp two or three days—longer if you prefer it—on the island. I've brought the necessary equipment and the best staff of men I could engage. Probably none of you have lived in tents, but let me assure you as an old traveller that, in such a climate as San Pedro, it is the height of luxury. It is proposed, there-

fore, to pitch a camp near this"—he indicated the inked cross with a short fat finger—"then we could look on and superintend the men making the necessary excavations. Whether or not our labours are rewarded—my friend Captain Norbert evidently looks on me as an amiable crank for my credulity!—I cannot say, but in any case I'm persuaded we shall have a splendid time on the island (for of course the *chef* goes with us; we couldn't get on without him), and treasure or no treasure, you will have done what no ladies ever did before!"

The ladies murmured rapturously.

"May we sleep on board if we prefer it?" asked Mrs. Tracy, whose complexion was delicate and required treatment.

"Of course, dear lady. But you'll be much more comfortable in such a camp as I propose," said Hart.

"I've been in camp in India," said Lady Horham. "Nothing could be more delightful. The novelty and charm will astonish those who haven't tried."

"I was in camp with the General in the cold weather in the Terai on a shooting excursion, and never enjoyed anything so much in my life!" said Mrs. Chesterfield, not to be outdone.

And Mrs. Upperton and Mrs. Mundsley had both encamped in the desert near Biskra, so that the only ladies who had never slept under tents were Emilia Arden and Mrs. Tracy, who were both eager to make the experiment.

"And what do you think, Captain Norbert?" asked Lady Horham.

"The tent to the contented mind becomes a happy home," he replied.

"Then," said Lady Horham, turning to Marcus, "I may say that we accept with gratitude, Mr. Hart, the arrangements which you have made for our comfort and the carrying out of our object. If all leaders exercised as much foresight and skill as you have done there would be fewer failures!"

"I am very grateful to you, Lady Horham," replied

Marcus as modestly as he could, "for your encouraging words."

At this point, coffee, the service of which Hart had purposely delayed in order to satisfy the curiosity of the ladies, was brought, accompanied by an elaborate collection of liqueurs. Then Marcus, taking a glass of cognac from the tray, in his most dashing manner raised it to his lips. "Here," he said, "is success to our Treasure Quest in a precious liqueur which King Louis Philippe might have tasted when it was new!"

The ladies drank the toast very prettily in Benedictine or green Chartreuse.

After this agreeable ceremony, in higher spirits than ever, they went up on deck, leaving Hart and Norbert alone in the saloon.

"So that's all right!" said Hart, looking at him.

"All right, why, it's a masterpiece! A lesson in geography, a lesson in the art of fiction, and the most original sea-picnic since the days of Cleopatra, besides being the most brilliant thing in smart advertisements attempted on our side of the Atlantic. If you had feasted your guests on elephants' backs at the Grange in a circus built for the purpose the thing would have been less talked about. No, the stroke of its kind is masterly. I hope you won't think I'm flattering you, Hart, but upon my word I see something like genius—and genius of quite a rare sort—in this most artistic performance got up for the entertainment of your friends and to dazzle an appreciative world. The sense of the theatre, moreover, which you have shown throughout, has been so admirable that I'm tempted to think that you half-believe in it yourself. Barnum couldn't have done the thing better if the ghost of the author of Monte Christo had appeared to him in a dream, and I'm prouder than I can tell you to have been allowed to take a minor part in this exquisite comedy."

But Marcus, who had been waiting for this outburst, was prepared to meet it.

"I rather expected you meant to get your knife

into me, Norbert, but just you wait till the end," he replied.

"When the curtain comes down," said Norbert, "I trust they'll call for me too! I wonder, Hart, that you never managed a theatre. You're cut out for it. To think that such gifts as yours have been wasted on finance!"

"Theatre be hanged!" retorted Marcus. "When I asked you to come, I didn't expect much encouragement from you. So far, I admit, you've looked on without making any serious attempt to spoil the ladies' fun. They're bent on discovering the treasure. The game, since you've made up your mind that the whole thing has been put up, has so far answered its purpose and amused them."

"They are like children looking for pebbles on the beach," said Norbert. "I've helped them to look so far, but with the occasional hint that they mustn't expect to find too much."

"Well, go on keeping it up. The cruise was chiefly got up to amuse Emilia Arden. Even if the whole thing were a joke, it's a dashed unsportsmanlike thing to try and spoil it. You wait till we *don't* find the treasure before you pull my leg about it, old chap!"

"But, my dear Hart, you mistake the spirit of my criticism," said Norbert. "Don't imagine that I'm reproaching you. I should not be profoundly astonished if we came on a treasure-trove which had its origin in Wardour Street! Pirates are capable of anything, and you are an artist of supreme foresight."

"Well, after that, Norbert, I think I'd better shut up! Your view of honour, I see, isn't quite what mine is, and there isn't room for us to quarrel on board my yacht. I'm off to have a yarn with my skipper."

Marcus got up with his face slightly more congested than usual, threw away the cigar which he had allowed to go out, lit another and adjusted his yachting cap on the back of his head.

"I can only repeat, Hart," said Norbert, watching

the operation quietly, "that you misinterpret the meaning of my, perhaps, too volatile criticisms. I assure you that I respect you quite as much as I did before you planned this most interesting cruise! The faith of your guests shall not be shaken by me!"

"Stow it, Norbert; we've had enough chaff for the present!" exclaimed Hart.

With that he left the saloon.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ladies had two enemies on board *The Dawn*, although they did not know it. Hart hated them as the goat-footed pursuer who has chased a nymph but clutched a reed loves the whole race of fleeting illusive beings who escape and mock him at the same time. But Captain West, the skipper, was an enemy of a less complex type. Resentment was at the bottom of his hostility. As a skipper he disliked "passengers" by instinct and not always without reason. On the day the eight guests came on board, just when they were off the Needles and lunch was over, standing near a widely open skylight, he had overheard a conversation between Mrs. Kington and Mrs. Tracy which he had added to the long list of "insults" remembered against "passengers."

"I don't much like the look of the captain, or whatever they call the man," Mrs. Tracy had said. "He has a red nose! No one would think of engaging a *chauffeur* with a red nose, and one naturally distrusts a sailor with one; it means drink!"

"Of course it doesn't help you to feel safe," the other lady replied, "but the skipper's may come from exposure, or possibly, poor man, it's indigestion! Marcus is much too careful of himself and his belongings to engage a man who drank. But I don't like the look of him any more than you do. Marcus might just as well have engaged some one less unlike a gentleman when he was about it. My idea of a sailor is a man with blue eyes, a pointed beard and a breezy confidence-inspiring manner. Our skipper is a surly, taciturn person, with the charms of a bear."

At this point Mr. Hart had entered the saloon, and

the skipper heard the ladies burst into a ripple of flattery, the insincerity of which shocked him.

"A pretty lot of Jezebels," he thought to himself. "If this is the smart set I've heard so much about, I can only hope I mayn't be called on to carry such a cargo again." And, as he reflected over it, the wrong done him grew. He was sensitive about his nose and proud of his gentlemanly bearing. Moreover, he had seen the ladies smoking cigarettes, and overheard fragments of conversation which, measured by the domestic standards to which he was accustomed, left much to be desired. The effect, therefore, made him an ardent supporter of his owner. If ever a lot of loose impudent huzzies deserved to be put in their proper places, certainly these did! Hart consequently found in his skipper a man whose heart was quite in his business.

Deeply incensed by Norbert's ridicule, he went to consult West, blustering within himself. He sought this relief because he was too cautious to indulge in it openly until quite sure that he could afford the vulgar luxury. He considered himself wronged. Norbert had been guilty of an offence against the laws of hospitality. It was Hart who had behaved with dignity and self-restraint! To mock your host offensively on his own yacht was the sort of thing Hart expected from a sham gentleman with nothing to bless himself with but the impudent veneer any fellow may pick up at Eton, Oxford, or in the Army.

For the moment Hart forgot that Norbert was on board for his own purposes, because he had discovered, although not for the first time, that the intended victim had a sting. The wound it inflicted smarted all the more venomously as he imagined Norbert telling Emilia how he had "scored off him."

Hart found West, his skipper, in his cabin smoking a pipe, and sat down in a cane chair opposite him.

"I've told the ladies, West," he said. "They're all as excited as grigs. All we've got to do now is to

decide how I can best bring my little joke off. I suppose you haven't been talking, West."

"I've said nothing, sir. In fact, there's nothing for me to say. I don't know what your joke is. Captain Norbert tried me, but I simply followed instructions and held my tongue."

"D—— Norbert! I'm sick of him. Have a cigar, West."

Hart handed his case; West helped himself. It pleased Hart to impress all men by the superlative excellence of his tobacco.

"An excellent cigar, sir," said the skipper.

"No man in Europe or America can offer you a better, West," replied Hart, watching the other thoughtfully.

"I'm sure of that, sir." •

Hart had chosen his man. Moreover, he was one of the few skippers who had ever landed on the deserted island of San Pedro. West, who had been employed on a line of steamers running between Liverpool and the West African ports, had lost his ship in consequence of a quarrel with a passenger who had taken his bath. The skipper's easily-kindled wrath blazed. "Get out of it at once!" he clamoured, "or I'll have you put in irons for an impudent dog."

But the bather, a man of importance and a shareholder in the Company employing West, replied from behind the closed door with equal energy and elegance of language. When at last, his toilet completed, the passenger came out, the skipper repeated his threat of arrest, to which the other, conscious of his weight, replied, "Captain West! I shall report you to your owners, who will no doubt know how to punish you for your brutal behaviour. They'll tell you who I am!" •

The result of the discovery was Captain West's "resignation." He had been too much on the "coast," the owners said; he lacked the tact requisite for dealing with passengers in these days of German competition. Moreover, in addition to a violent

temper, Captain West was rumoured to take more whisky than is now considered necessary for those who go to sea in great ships.

When Hart sent for him, West, who had been "out of a job" for eighteen months, was ready, as he admitted, "to turn his hand to anything."

There were several reasons recommending him to the owner of *The Dawn*; not the least of these was West's hatred of passengers, against whom, as a class, he had treasured the memory of twenty-five years' real or imaginary wrongs.

"All you have to do," said Hart, when he engaged him, "is to help me carry out a few little innocent jokes at the expense of certain dear friends of mine who deserve a lesson. Payment will be by result. See?"

The terms offered were lavish, and West readily fell in with the idea. To disturb the comfort of his fellow creatures, especially of those who were supercilious, successful and of social privileges unattainable by himself, seemed quite a desirable duty, especially when imposed on him by an owner and liberally paid for. The sea, as on rare occasions it may, had brought out the worst side of this skipper's character. This, as Hart perceived, rendered him peculiarly qualified to play the part that was to be assigned him.

They smoked in silence. West was in better humour. The owner had sent him a bottle of champagne—the skipper loved champagne, which kindled his grim absence of humour and brought brightness to the dimmer recesses of his mind which whisky left in obscure twilight.

"You've noticed my lot," said Hart, "and I dare say wonder why I brought 'em!"

The skipper admitted that it wasn't quite clear to him, but, remembering a former conversation, inferred it was "to give 'em a lesson."

"That's the word," said Hart. "Now I'll explain, and I hope you'll see my drift. You needn't imagine I intend 'em to 'walk the plank' or to put 'em in

irons." What? You'll find a sound moral principle behind what I'm driving at."

The skipper nodded.

"I've thought the thing out," Hart continued, "and mean to make 'em the subject of a really scientific experiment—for their own good, too!"

Hart chuckled. The skipper said, "I'm with you so far, sir: 'For their own good, too'!"

"My object," Hart went on, "is to ascertain how this lot of mine, brought up in the midst of the fattest luxury, will behave when we frighten 'em out of their wits. They're types of a class which fancy they rule society; my object is to introduce 'em to a little nature in the raw! So far they've been concealed from themselves, because not one of 'em ever touched hard facts as you and I have. They think themselves the salt o' the earth. I'm going to teach 'em they're only cheap dust with a polish on! So you see, West, my purpose is a moral one, with just a little chastening in it. What?"

"They're just a lot of idle, useless, pleasure-loving society people, to whom, for their own good, you want to give a bit of a fright?"

West grinned. "This offered to be one of the few jokes he could understand.

"That's it," replied Hart. "Now all we've to do is to manage it neatly. So far as ever they'll see it must seem just a bit o' bad luck, West! The thing's been done before—but clumsily. Did you ever hear of Low's little game?"

And Hart told the interested skipper of Low's ill-treatment of his guests by exposing them to a Pacific storm.

"There was too much risk in that," Hart remarked; whilst West considered that the thing should be done without "tempting Providence too much."

"Tempt Providence!" exclaimed Hart. "Why, we're on the same side as Providence! We're just going to help it do its bidding. Providence needs a little nice guidance at times. Now this plan of mine

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to land on San Pedro and do a bit of digging will give us our chance. We shall arrive off the island, I take it, about four o'clock on Friday next?"

The skipper nodded.

"There's a good long swell generally on there, I'm told."

"Runs in heavy at times," assented West; "still there's fair anchorage."

"Well, the first night we'll go ashore with tents and things," Hart went on, "taking most of the crew with us under pretence of pitching the camp. Then, because we can't get off again on account of the swell, we'll let 'em lie off all night at anchor. The swell will give 'em a doing and lay most of 'em on their backs. Early next morning we'll go aboard again and get our lot ashore, where, thanks to our thoughtful arrangements, things will be at sixes and sevens! That evening you and I will take the crew aboard again and forget the things that ought to have been taken on the first journey—bedding, grub, comforts, etc.—but the barometer's falling and the anchorage dangerous, so you as skipper insist on fixing on a safer place. This will give 'em a pleasant night ashore with nothing to sleep on and deuced little to eat. That's my plan in the rough, West. If anything can harden my lot o' friends to the realities of life that should. We—for I see we understand one another—can alter our moral lesson to suit circumstances as required. The whole lot of 'em—Norbert excepted—are as helpless as canaries 'at sea and as ignorant of sea-faring."

"Mr. Hart," said West, still under the after-glow of his owner's champagne, "Mr. Hart, this is the sort of idea that only occurs to a man of original mind. I'm sorry to say I was never in a position to step in and help Providence adjust balances, if I may say so without disrespect. But you've treated them like a prince, so far—nothing spared, sir—now your aim is, so far as I see it, to make 'em repent."

"Thank you, West, repent's the word. But it won't

suit my book to lose 'em as friends because, as you truly said—and it's to your credit, West—I'm helping Providence in the chastening line. Who knows? after this, some of 'em may even start saving their poor little souls! Everything must have a beginning, even repentance. This may be the beginning of what I've heard sometimes called 'a new life' for some of 'em! I'm not—what-you-may-call-it—chastening 'em out of spite for my amusement or yours, but for their good. Just the same as a school-master—especially the sort that becomes a bishop, whacks his boys for theirs. It will help 'em keep to the right path!"

"You're a wonder!" exclaimed West. "It's a pleasure to work for you. It is indeed. If only I'd had your opportunities with some of my passengers, what a lot of good I could have done them, to be sure!"

"That chap who got you the sack because he bagged your bath, eh, West?" replied Hart. "Some of your chastening would have done him no harm, I take it! As it was, you got the chastening! My eight guests, all of 'em without exception, wipe their boots on me when they fancy I'm not looking. Did you ever hear of a chap called Timon in a play, West? No! Play-going, I dessay, ish't very much in your way. Well! they've made me their Timon. Others have seen it too, and taken care I should know it. They've taken my bath—I'm putting it this way to make you see it clear, West—and left me hammering at the door whilst they wallow in my warm water."

"I see, sir, I see," replied Captain West, deeply interested; "but the difference is you've no owners."

"Owners be hanged, West. I'm their owner, and I mean to see what some of these fine ladies look like with their clothes off."

"Surely you don't mean—" broke in the captain, "to—eh—to—we can't go so far as——"

"Hang it, man! it's a figure of speech," Marcus broke in. "I mean to see what these smart women look like when we've frightened 'em out of their attitudes, poses and affectations. With their poses off,

I mean. And you shall see it too! But we've said enough for the present. You and I are at one in this, and you'll find it the best paid job in sea-faring that ever came in your line, but you must stand by me like a man. The only thing I'm a bit doubtful about is how far San Pedro will suit our purpose as an elegant penitentiary for smart sinners, West."

West reflected a moment. One reason for his selection was the fact that he was acquainted with the island. The only thing against it, he said, was the difficulty of landing, if there was any swell on. There was very little beach, and unless the sea was calm there was always some risk of knocking a hole in a boat as you were running her on-shore. These risks, which in the complacency of the moment Captain West determined not to exaggerate, it was agreed must be accepted. Then, gratified by the enthusiastic support of his skipper, Marcus returned to his guests in a better humour than when he had left the saloon after his talk with Norbert.

With his skipper, Hart relaxed into the natural Hart, but at tea, served on deck under the awning, in the warm afternoon air bitten by the shrewd bitterness of the sea, he became once more the carpet knight.

As he walked the deck apart, the skipper watched him with wonder. "To hear him," he said, "you'd fancy he was one of them, though not to look at."

So the skipper watched "what was going on" with a grim countenance, remembering his wrongs, and in fullest sympathy with his owner's purpose.

A solemn man of narrow views who attended chapel when ashore, and despised the frivolous and immoral, he easily believed that the ladies whom he had failed to please, especially needed, as he phrased it, "to have *their* powdered noses rubbed against the rough edges of life."

CHAPTER XIX

THE golden serenity of sea and sky deepened as *The Dawn* steered south-west. The balmy airs from Africa scarcely ruffled the blue of the calm. Cloudless days, exquisite nights, called forth sentimental reveries. Even the bridge-tables were abandoned for the deck. Lulled by luxury, Hart's guests suspected nothing. The *chef* nearly reached even his employer's gastronomic ideals. "Wanton waste!" muttered the skipper to himself behind his shield of taciturnity.

Some of the ladies watched him curiously. Attempts were made to break through his implacable reserve, but the skipper, like Juno mindful of her slighted beauty, yielded to no blandishments.

"Gaudy Jezebels!" he reflected; "without the fear of God in 'em. They'd leer at me if I'd encourage 'em."

"He really can't stand us!" Mrs. Kington admitted to Mrs. Upperton. "He thinks we're wicked."

"Marcus says he is afraid of a stern wife at Liverpool, and daren't let himself go," Mrs. Upperton replied.

There was much frivolous chatter on the subject, and Hart was told that his skipper was the one blot in his otherwise perfect plans.

"Captain West throws a blight on us," Mrs. Upperton declared to her host, now all big-mouthed smiles and lavish hospitality; "and the next time you take us for a cruise, Mr. Hart, I hope you'll get a less ill-favoured skipper."

"He may be a blighter, dear lady," replied Marcus, "but he's a dashed fine seaman!"

All of which things, and more besides, Marcus reported to West, to "keep him up to the requisite pitch of animosity.

The skipper, strong in his virtue, retorted. It wasn't for him to dictate, but he must say the spectacle of the ingratitude of these ladies towards his owner made him savage.

"But thank the Lord, you're not deceived," Captain West continued. "You know as well as I do, that they flatter you to your face and make game of you behind your back, Mr. Hart. That's what this class of woman calls friendship."

And thus the communications of skipper and owner spurred the animosity of both. Nor were other avenues of insight wanting. If the skipper's mouth was shut, his eyes were not. Strange fragments of chatter broke in on him as he walked the deck; jests in a language half-understood, gusts of a flippancy fringing on what he regarded as "indelicate."

"Gambling, loose talk, impertinence, no morals, and a damned sight too much pretty manner; I'll have no truck with 'em," he thought.

Mrs. Kington was right. The skipper did not admire them. He was also determined to let his owner know that they loved him no more.

"What d'you think they call you?" Hart asked him.

"So far I've only discovered what they call you," the skipper retorted.

"What do they call me?" he snorted.

"'The Black Man at the Gate'—whatever that means."

"Oh, that!" replied Hart. "Properly understood it's a term of endearment. You're something much sillier. Old St. Kevin's what they call you."

"Not being an idolator I never heard of him," answered the skipper, with lofty contempt.

"It seems he was an over-virtuous chap who hated women, and when one followed him to enjoy the

pleasures of his conversation, West, he chucked her into a lake!"

Hart chuckled.

"They're just gaudy Jezebels, if you'll excuse me for speaking disrespectfully of your guests," replied the nettled skipper.

"Don't call 'em 'my guests,' call 'em our cargo, West," returned Hart. "We're going to send 'em back, after having put what you call the fear o' God into them. Wait till I get them on that island with little to eat, and nothing but hard rock to sleep on, and with you and *The Dawn* out of sight, because the anchorage is dangerous and storms brewing. Still, West, you must admit they are a nice lot to look at!"

"Maybe," assented the skipper, "if you like that sort o' thing. Too pampered for my taste. Give me nature."

What was the good of them? That was what he wished to know! They were just a fantastical pack of dressed-up dolls!

"Because they don't admire your red nose, West?" interrupted Marcus.

No, the skipper's red nose had not influenced his honest opinion. It was because they filled no useful purpose in the general scheme of things.

Marcus protested. West was talking like a beastly Radical. But the skipper stuck to his guns. Politics had nothing whatever to do with it! Just look at them! Did they bring large healthy families into the world? That was the skipper's point. So far as he could see, they were just expensive luxuries which sensible men preferred to forego. It was all very well to call them "a product of the time!" A nice sort of time produced gaudy weeds of that description! Of course he could see differences in them. There was Miss Arden, for instance. Quite a fine young woman she was, not always opening her mouth when she had nothing to say, and much more like the natural article than the others!

Here Hart felt the pinch.

"She's the one that wants taming most, West," he retorted.

"I think you may trust Captain Norbert to do that," returned the skipper. "If I may say so, he has brought the young woman nicely to heel. Why, she'd fetch his slippers if he told her to!"

Dinner was over. The eight guests were scattered about the deck. The awning had been removed. The last glimmer of twilight was disappearing in the west, where a pale star was swimming in the waning gleam. Norbert and Emilia Arden were standing together watching the point in the horizon where the moon would shortly raise a silver lantern over the edge of the sea.

They were always together, confound them!

Certain whispers concerning Miss Arden had reached the skipper, who knew that the owner was jealous. This vague knowledge fired his last shaft. It hit the mark and produced a savage glare.

"Got him on the raw that time!" he reflected as Hart rolled off, emitting from the sonorous regions of his throat the customary muffled roar.

What, he asked himself, was Emilia's game? Was she chucking herself at the chap's head to annoy him—to show she was on her holiday and meant to enjoy it—or was it serious?

Finally he interpreted it simply. She was flirting with Norbert out of bravado to exasperate him! Well, he'd pay them out. He would take care Norbert wasn't back at the War Office till long after his leave was up—and as for the girl? Well, there was plenty of time after marriage for dressing her down!

Disturbed by these thoughts, Hart broke in on them in his jolliest manner. Seeing him approach, Emilia had whispered, "Please don't leave me. I can't stand him to-night."

The twilight waned, the rim of the moon came up above the horizon, the fine yacht drove on through the silver gleam, leaving a tumbled furrow that flashed

into pale cold flames where the slanting rays touched the churned foam.

"If we only had your mother here, Emilia, and the dear Duchess," observed Hart, "what a party we should be!"

And as she listened, the girl felt how deeply they both hated him.

A little later Lady Horham claimed them for bridge, and Captain West was left sole occupant of the moonlit deck. His measured step reached the ears of the card-players deep in their game.

To-morrow, he remembered, another game was to begin. He thought of all that had been said to him, and remembered these sort of jokes sometimes ended in a court of law. He hated lawyers and law courts. In his experience both had been forces arrayed against him. But Hart wasn't the sort of man to make a mistake. The only risk was Norbert. The scheme to prevent him getting back to his work seemed the only risky business, so far as the skipper could see.

Then he heard the piano. One lot had given over cards. Some one was singing. The song was French—at least it sounded French. There wasn't much tune in it, but it set all the other women laughing. He heard one of them say—"What an awful song, Polly!" The other replied, "What does it matter, my dear woman, if you don't understand the words?"

Then another voice said, "You didn't sing it as though it had no meaning."

"One meaning or two!" exclaimed the owner; (there was no mistaking his voice).

"A nice lot!" reflected the skipper.

Then Mrs. Kington and Mrs. Tracy, with bare arms and shoulders shining in the moonlight, came on deck for a moment.

"What a night!" exclaimed Mrs. Kington.

"Heavenly!" exclaimed the other.

Then they joined the skipper and spoke of the beauty of the stars and moon; they envied him, they said, he must have seen so many lovely things at sea.

There was something so exquisitely romantic in a sailor's life. His, they were convinced, was made up of romance.

West replied that if romance meant obeying owners' instructions, certainly he'd had his full share.

"But what's your most romantic adventure—do tell us, Captain West?" pleaded Mrs. Tracy sweetly.

"I should say this was," he replied.

"How nice of you to say that! Such a charming compliment," said Mrs. Kington. "But sailors are always gallant, aren't they, captain?"

To this he made no reply, regarding it as the silly chatter of female passengers which no self-respecting skipper considered.

Both the ladies laughed. Mrs. Kington, still cooing at him, knew that he was much too modest to admit it.

Then Mrs. Tracy wondered when they should see the wonderful island, and he replied, "To-morrow about ten it will be in sight."

"Then what are we supposed to do?" said Mrs. Kington.

"They must await the owner's instructions," he answered.

He noticed that Mrs. Kington's lips were a vivid red whenever the electric light fell on her face, and that she wiped them carefully as though to preserve their colour. "Old St. Kevin, am I?" he wondered. He would read about St. Kevin in the encyclopædia in the Free Library when he got home!

Then they left him, and the skipper turned in.

On the following morning a dim stain on the cloudless south-western horizon appeared. By ten o'clock a serrated profile of sun-baked hills, parched and desolate, rose from the sea.

There was something ominous in its arid aspect.

"I expected something green with palms," murmured Mrs. Kington to Mrs. Tracy.

"How frightfully hot it will be!" the other replied. "I shall wear my sun-hat."

"Surely we're not going to land there, Mr. Hart?" exclaimed Mrs. Mundsley.

"Not till it's been properly prepared for you," he replied with a grin.

Alert and resolute, he had assumed the airs of one commanding an expedition. The obsequious genial host was receding. The skipper and he held long conversations apart. The skipper when questioned appeared not to hear, or answered vaguely. Hart spoke to the men. There was an air, as Mrs. Upperton observed, of "something being up."

"Plan of campaign not quite arranged yet," Hart replied when the ladies attacked him collectively. Then he moved off abruptly.

"I think he ought to let you into the secret—for I can't help feeling there is a secret, Captain Norbert!" said Lady Horham.

"We must trust our leader if we criticize him afterwards," said Norbert.

"The worst of criticism it's always too late to do any good," said Mrs. Mundsley.

"Where's Mr. Hart?" asked Mrs. Tracy of Mrs. Chesterfield, who was busily writing in her note-book a description of the island's first appearance.

"Aft, talking to the skipper," she replied, looking across the dazzling stretch of sea, and counting the five peaked summits threatening the brazen sky.

"Where's aft?" asked Mrs. Tracy.

"That end of a ship is always called aft," replied Mrs. Chesterfield, scribbling steadily.

"Do tell us what you've written?" said Mrs. Upperton.

Mrs. Chesterfield read aloud: "On Friday at day-break, land in sight. It rose like a faint stain on the emerald main. Gradually, as it took shape, we beheld five gaunt metallic hills raising grim crests into the blue immensity. Volcanic evidently—flung up from the profound ocean depths by some vast upheaval, or torn from the flank of Africa by a tremendous cataclysm!"

Printed by
Sri Baldev Ballav Sen
8/1-A, Mathur Sen Garden Lane
Calcutta—700008
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"Charming!" murmured Lady Horham approvingly. "But what about us?"

"All was now excitement on board," continued the authoress. "Our leader, bombarded with questions, became reassuringly reticent, as becomes the leader of the New Argonauts. The chief took counsel with his skipper—one of those strong silent men who express themselves in action, not in words, and inspire confidence in all around them by their massive serenity. We shall know what has been arranged ere long. The impression is that we shall anchor, and then the landing party under Mr. Hart and Captain West will go ashore to prepare the way for the second detachment. The ladies, of course, will be the last to land, for no precautions will be lacking to insure our comfort."

"I hope so," murmured Mrs. Tracy.

"It feels like going back to school," observed Mrs. Mundsley.

"Quite brilliantly done!" said Lady Horham to Mrs. Chesterfield. "Such an original style too."

Norbert and Emilia were a few paces off, deep in conversation.

"I do wish they wouldn't," murmured Mrs. Chesterfield, glancing at them.

"Why? Because you can't put it in your book?" asked Mrs. Mundsley.

"No, although of course that side of life won't be touched on. Because it makes Marcus jealous, and"—here a nervous flutter broke the evenness of her voice—"after all, we are in his power."

"What an awful thing to say!" exclaimed Mrs. Tracy anxiously.

"My dear Carrie," said Mrs. Kington, "Marcus isn't a pirate."

"I only meant that it was indiscreet of Emilia to make Marcus jealous when—well, when we're about to land on a desert island," Mrs. Chesterfield answered. "I've told Emilia so, but she's perfectly reckless. Besides, even if she isn't actually engaged to him, she

is on board his yacht. I admit I should feel a certain relief if, for the remainder of this trip, she would try to keep him in the best of tempers."

Mrs. Chesterfield's words created uneasiness. They seemed such frail atoms in this lonely, dazzling world of sea and sky. They were conscious, too, of a change in Hart's manner. He had become more masterful, almost dictatorial.

Mrs. Tracy broke the silence. "Billy says Marcus is a megalomaniac."

"What's that?" asked Mrs. Mundsley nervously.

"Well, Nero was a sort of megalomaniac," Mrs. Tracy explained.

"I think Captain Norbert should be spoken to," observed Mrs. Chesterfield, glancing at Lady Horham.

"We do wish you'd speak to him at once!" exclaimed Mrs. Tracy and Mrs. Mundsley in a breath.

"I really don't see why they shouldn't be let alone," said Mrs. Upperton.

"Under ordinary circumstances—yes," assented Lady Horham. "But now?" She looked dubious.

"But you will speak to him," urged Mrs. Tracy, whose temperament, both nervous and imaginative, made her an easy prey to terrors.

"I'll see what can be done," Lady Horham answered, "if some one will get Emilia away."

"Poor dear! she clings to him because she's afraid of Marcus," said Mrs. Kington.

"Scarcely a dignified position for Captain Norbert," said Lady Horham.

"He was dragged into it," said Mrs. Kington, with an air of complete knowledge.

"My dear Gertie, you can't drag a man into things," Lady Horham argued.

"I never said it was against his will," returned Mrs. Kington.

"Marcus and Captain Norbert hate one another so!" exclaimed Mrs. Mundsley. "They scarcely speak."

Then Mrs. Mundsley and Mrs. Kington joined Norbert and Emilia. Lady Horham followed. On the group breaking up, Norbert walked the deck with Lady Horham whilst she unfolded "the position" as prettily as possible.

Norbert learnt that the ladies were "a little anxious." His friendship with Emilia—one of the most charming and platonic things ever observed by Lady Horham—was not being taken in the right spirit by their host, to whom, as their host, a certain deference was due. It was right, they thought, to keep Marcus Hart in the best possible temper. As it was, she had reason to fear that he was secretly jealous, and, to the casual and unintelligent observer, not without cause. Some of the committee even went so far as to assert that Emilia was making Mr. Hart jealous on purpose. But he was no ordinary man, nor were the present ordinary circumstances. They were, to some extent at least, in the power of a man of peculiar temperament. In any case they were most anxious to avoid all unpleasantness.

"How can there be unpleasantness?" Norbert asked.

"Because," Lady Horham answered, "it looks as if Emilia were trying to compel Mr. Hart to release her from whatever promise she may have given him."

"The subject beyond this, Lady Horham, scarcely encourages frank discussion," said Norbert.

"I feel that too, Captain Norbert," she replied; "so I'll only say that, if Emilia will defer doing what she seems determined to do until this cruise is over, it would be much pleasanter for all concerned. And I do wish you would use your influence with our dear Emilia in this direction."

And Lady Horham stopped to admire the courage that had carried her so far. Fortunately for Norbert, he was spared any serious reply. Whilst Lady Horham was concentrating all her sweetness and tact in her appeal, *The Dawn* had approached the northern

side of the island, and suddenly, observing the manœuvre, she exclaimed—

“What on earth are we doing that for?”

“Because,” said Norbert, “there's no anchorage to the south and no landing-place.”

“How awful it looks!” she said anxiously. “You can hear the waves!”

They were now within two miles of a rugged, brown shore, on which the long, slow swell flashed and swirled in foam. A hoarse murmur stirred across the blue sea after every blow. The yacht slowed down.

“What's going to happen?” asked Lady Horham.

“We shall anchor as Hart promised,” said he.

“I feel,” she said, “as though we had come to the end of something.”

CHAPTER XX

THE throbbing of the screw ceased, the breeze raised by the rush of *The Dawn* over the calm seas no longer fanned their faces, and the ladies, for the first time since they had left Southampton, discovered that the heat was great. • Nor was this their only grievance. All at once they seemed to have become a less all-important influence over the destinies of the yacht. Hart was still busy with his skipper, as Mrs. Chesterfield said, "formulating plans." She found comfort in the word. Hart had already snubbed her twice when she had questioned him. She couldn't, he said, expect it all to be champagne and *pâte de foie gras*!

The ladies stood in a little group gazing at their island, which seemed to look back at them in blank defiance. No wonder it was uninhabited! Even the goats, which had once tried to browse on the hills—this information Mrs. Chesterfield had gathered—had died off.

"Just think!" murmured Mrs. Tracy, "we're to live where goats can't!"

The sun was now at its zenith, the sky a burning blue, the island rocks shone like brass. The anchored yacht began to swing unpleasantly. The movement, insistent, irritating, questioning as it were the value of several pairs of alleged sea-legs, increased the as yet unuttered sense of gathering depression.

In her note-book Mrs. Chesterfield wrote: "About mid-day we anchored off the rocky crags of San Pedro. The aspect of the lonely island on the blue bosom of the ocean is sublime but menacing. How great the contrast! On the deck of the gallant yacht, clad in

coolest white, the *dernier cri* of modern civilization and elaborate feminine culture, clustered the group of treasure-seekers, their eyes wistfully fixed on the yellow cliffs where the surf was thundering, wondering, perchance, where a landing-place could be found amid the eternal conflict that raged between barren land and the relentless truculence of the sea. Misgivings would have stirred in more than one heart had we not turned our eyes on the strong dark face of our leader—the face, it might have been, of some bold Phœnician explorer under the yachting cap of the modern yachtsman—and gathered comfort from its energetic serenity."

"Such a relief to have something to do," said Mrs. Kington, who was permitted to peruse the last paragraph. "It keeps you from thinking, and may help you to forget this horrible rolling!"

Then a long hour was spent. The crew, under the eyes of the skipper and owner, brought up various tents, packing-cases, and stores, and placed them in the boats.

"S'pose yer can land all right, Bill?" said one man to another.

"That's the skipper's look-out," was the reply. "I've a notion it's behind that —— rock."

A fragment of this muttered conversation reached the quick ears of Mrs. Tracy, who at once told the others that "even the crew were afraid." Norbert reassured them. Their much-admired Marcus would incur no risks either for his yacht or his own precious comfort! Then again, when Lady Horham and Mrs. Upperton questioned the members of the crew, the answers were all on the side of security.

"Bless you, ma'am. there's nothing to be frightened of. The skipper knows his job an' we know ours!"

"They gave us," Mrs. Upperton reported, "no end of sea-faring reasons proving how safe we ought to think ourselves lying off this dismal place!"

But, as none of them knew one end of a ship from another, comfort was only possible when backed by

faith, and that faith Mr. Hart had contrived to shake. After all, he had told them, they must remember it was a treasure-hunt, and be prepared to take the rough with the smooth!

Then the luncheon hour came round—the least elaborate meal they had yet had on board. The servants apologized. Certain stores were beginning to give out.

Then Hart sent down word that he was busy, and begged to be excused. For once the cheerful popping of champagne corks was wanting to dispel their doubts. Through the open ports the island crags seemed to leer at them, the sea made strange lapping sounds against the yacht's sides—murmurs pregnant with threatening whispers. All the sea-voices seemed hostile. As the yacht rocked uneasily in the lazy swell, like a tethered beast fretting at its unaccustomed halter, the azaleas tossed their fragrant heads, and the perspective of saloon shifted uneasily, before the anxious eyes of the lunchers.

"It will be more comfortable when we get on shore!" they said. "Much more!"

Before that uncheerful meal was over several ladies, pale and pensive, sought the seclusion of their cabins until the sounds from the deck told them that the boats were being launched.

Meanwhile Hart remained shut up with the skipper, whose telescope through the open port scanned the narrow surf-beaten shore, on which, as the tide fell, something resembling a beach became visible.

When at last Hart and the skipper emerged, each with a big cigar in his mouth, the guests rushed at them.

"Are you going ashore?" asked Lady Horham excitedly. "Do pray be careful, Mr. Hart. We shall be most anxious till we see you safe on land!"

"It isn't quite like landing on Ryde Pier," said Marcus with his sea-dog air, "but it'll have to be done, and we must take the risks."

"There are risks, then?" said Mrs. Tracy appre-

tensively, depressed by the movements of the yacht, which, for a sea apparently so calm, were of a searching nature.

"What are the risks, West, eh?" asked Hart, with a grin.

"Tell you, sir, when I see them," was the reply.

Then, ignoring the ladies, they turned to the work before them.

The two boats already packed were swung neatly into the sea. Portmanteaus containing the baggage which the Eight Guests deemed necessary for the expedition were already piled up in one of them. Most of the stewards and four of the five stewardesses were ordered to take their places. The boats lay alongside, swinging gently, with their crews. Hart turned to his guests. They would return for them, he said, in the cool of the evening. Meanwhile the camp would be prepared, and unless luck was dead against them, they might boast of dining on an island where no ladies ever dined before! A treasure-hunt, he repeated, was a treasure-hunt. A spice of danger and a spice of temporary discomfort wasn't likely to daunt the spirit of adventure which had brought them so far.

This little speech increased the deepening gloom. It wasn't, they murmured, quite what they expected. So much seemed left to chance. Something even more serious than their personal discomfort might be at stake. Yet it was impossible to believe that this gross-looking luxury-loving man would run into danger out of sheer lust of excitement!

"Surely," Mrs. Chesterfield, who was the most imaginative, reflected, "surely he doesn't mean to torture us?"

But Captain Norbert intervened with a joke.

"If there are cannibals on shore, Captain West," he said, "perhaps you'll send up a rocket, then we shall know what to do."

"If you could navigate the yacht!" retorted the skipper gruffly, "you might."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Hart insolently, doffing his cap to his guests, "*au revoir*, ladies. Hope to meet you at tea."

Then he got into the captain's boat, the two crews pulled out of the purple shadow of the yacht into the dazzling glare of the sea, Mrs. Chesterfield alone waving them a farewell.

A silence descended on them as the splash of the oars was lost in the distance.

"They've taken nearly everybody—even the *chef* and the pipe-bearer," said Mrs. Tracy sadly.

It was felt by some that Marcus was behaving badly.

"I never saw him like it before," Lady Horham complained—"never."

"He was so very much in earnest," said Mrs. Chesterfield in excuse, "that's all."

Mrs. Kington made a gallant effort. Running down to the saloon, she played a few bars of a popular tune then raging like an epidemic in London. The little insolent tinkle was swallowed up and lost in the murmuring sea solitudes. "It's no good!" she said, "the island's haunted, and I'm crushed."

"And here's the devil guarding it!" said Emilia Arden, who had been sketching by the open port.

"O Emilia!" cried Mrs. Kington. Then she called the others, who gathered round.

The contorted rock which gave the island its most sinister aspect had been changed by Emilia's pencil into a caricature of Marcus Hart. The cleft in the rock represented a greedy mouth opening with an air of ogre-like hunger.

"How wickedly clever!" exclaimed Mrs. Chesterfield; "but how could you, Emilia?"

"I only hope the brute may see it!" murmured Mrs. Tracy, whom the swinging yacht most discomfited. But Norbert tore the page from the sketch-book and put it in his pocket.

"I'll keep it," said he, "as a souvenir."

Emilia laughed. Her sense of freedom seemed to

grow as Marcus Hart was rowed away into the dazzling sea till his fat round back disappeared in the refracted lights. They returned to the deck to watch the landing. Bates, the officer left in charge, was surrounded and questioned.

Suppose a storm came on whilst they were anchored, what would happen? Suppose the yacht ran on one of those rocks. Suppose this and suppose that. The ladies were full of sinister suppositions. Mr. Bates supposed if all the things happened that they'd all be done for without fear or favour.

Whilst this conversation was taking place the boats, followed by every glass on board, had neared the island, and were seen to hesitate before the fringe of foam.

"Not so easy as the skipper thought," said Norbert.

"A nasty job," assented Bates. "They should 'a waited till the tide was a bit lower, but Mr. Hart was in a hurry. Now they're going to try their luck."

Then the first and larger galley made a dash towards the beach. They beheld a confused flash of oars and splashes of foam; a moment later the men had leapt in the shallow water and were pulling at the boat, which seemed fixed on the edge of the sand.

"What's happened?" asked Norbert anxiously, of the sailor beside him.

"Blessed if they haven't knocked a hole in her!" replied a seaman. Comedy seemed turning to tragedy.

On the narrow reef-beaten shore the excitement and dismay were visible. Hart could be seen gesticulating angrily whilst the men lightened the boat preparatory to another attempt to drag her beyond reach of the surf. But the second effort failed as the first had done.

"That's what they've — well done!" muttered the sailor aghast. "Stove her in!"

In his perturbation he swore before the ladies.

"The other boat will come back," said Norbert, "it can't take the risks."

"Ain't so sure, sir," said the sailor. "If they don't get the big galley out she'll be knocked to splinters."

The man was right. After some gesticulation and apparently much shouting of instructions, the second boat attempted to row in.

The attempt was watched with intense anxiety, for it had dawned on the mind of every man and woman on board that, if communication between the island and the yacht were cut off, the situation might easily become grave.

The boat pulled in cautiously, apparently trying to avoid the heavy swell which intermittently scoured the narrow beach. Once more luck was against them. Some unexpected heave of the treacherous sea lifted the boat, which for a moment seemed to hang in the air whilst the foam leapt over it.

"Struck on a —— rock!" swore the sailor. "Ripped a hole in her —— bottom. This is a fool's game!"

But the boat, with an effort, seemed to free herself from the invisible hand detaining her and to leap into smoother water, where with difficulty it was beached. Thus in profound anxiety the ladies watched the struggle on the now almost crowded narrow beach.

"I told you the island was haunted!" murmured Mrs. Kington, with a white face contrasting strangely with her poppy-red lips.

They could see the stewardesses wringing their wet skirts, the cook waving agitated arms, whilst the seamen hastily carried the cargo from the galley, which bumped and swayed as the foam dashed over her sides.

Then, leaving their own craft, the second crew hurried to the aid of the first. At last, after repeated efforts, they succeeded in dragging her up on the sand beyond the reach of the waves.

A similar operation was afterwards carried out with the second boat. Then at length, in answer to their signals, those on board the yacht gathered the worst.

The first boat had a big hole knocked in her

bottom, and the second had received injuries which the carpenter hoped to repair. Meanwhile all other communication between the yacht and the island was cut off. The ladies gathered round Norbert, a terrified group. What was to be done?

The yacht and even the engine-room were now greatly undermanned. For the present the orders from shore were to lie off at anchor and await instructions.

Of the ladies, Emilia Arden's courage alone was unshaken. Mr. Hart had muddled it, she said, but they must make the best of it. They had come expecting adventures, and oughtn't to be disappointed because they had met them. What was the worst that could happen to them? The ladies turned their anxious faces to Norbert for a reply.

The worst that might happen, he said, was that the weather might change before the damaged boats could be launched. In that case they would have to leave their anchorage and put to sea. As there was scarcely enough men to navigate the yacht, the prospect was not pleasant.

"And now," said Mrs. Chesterfield, "we do know the worst." And she made a note of it.

But the sailors among themselves grumbled.

Formerly *The Dawn* had been provided with three boats beside the steam launch. Why had they been left behind at Southampton?

"The Lord knows!" replied Mackinnon, the engineer, to Bates, "but ye needna tell the leddies. Maybe 'twill be a fearfu' responsibeeleety for some one. But your private owner is full o' sinfu' caprice, and we must pay fo' it."

CHAPTER XXI

FROM the yacht's deck they watched the island. As the sun sank the swell decreased, and the colour partially returned to Mrs. Tracy's cheeks.

Bates, who was left in charge of the yacht, was a handsome man of forty, whose face sea-faring cynics said was his fortune. He was known among yachtsmen as "the Ornament," and a better fair-weather sailor rarely navigated the Solent. His striking appearance had marked him out for the approval of Mr. Hart's guests. Landswomen, as the satirical skipper remarked, all loved him. The poor fellow was now to be tested. Unused to decide for himself, his uneasiness was not concealed from Norbert, who took council with him. The skipper, Bates said, had thought it rash to take so many of the men ashore, but had been overruled by Mr. Hart. "Mr. Hart was bent on getting you all ashore to-night, sir," he added. "Then the crew was to come on board, and we were to cruise about till wanted. This jamming o' the two boats on the rocks has upset all the plans. As it is, if the weather gets nasty we may find ourselves in a tight place." This, expressed and re-expressed with a certain grumbling, was Bates's view. Norbert found it far from reassuring.

"Don't tell the ladies," said he. "We must make the best of it."

Then he rejoined them. They could see the others on the beach in the blaze of the sun. A tent had been pitched near a patch of scrubby yellow vegetation. One boat had been carried above the ridge of sand. Men were apparently busied with the repairs. For more than an hour no message had been exchanged.

"There isn't much to worry about, is there?" said Emilia as Norbert joined them. "I keep on saying there isn't, but they won't believe me."

Norbert repeated vague assurances.

The deck-chairs were grouped together. They sat gazing on the island, conjecturing. How long did it take to mend a boat? Would it be easy to launch it? Wasn't it probable that Marcus, if he once got on board again, would abandon the treasure-hunt and get back as fast as he could? He must have had more than enough of it by this time! Certainly he had mismanaged the thing dreadfully!

Their talk followed the circle of anxieties and hopes without reaching the point of comfort.

Finally some one asked Emilia to sing. Mrs. Mundsley and Mrs. Tracy, both plunged in gloom and secretly exchanging regrets that they had been fools enough to come and leave their husbands (if only they were here now how different it would all seem!), begged for Gounod's "Ave Maria," the occasional singing of which had won Miss Arden some reputation.

"Shall I?" asked Emilia, turning to Norbert.

"Do," said he.

He accompanied her to the beautifully upholstered deckhouse, known as the "Music-room."

The others watched them through the open door.

"Emilia never does anything without referring to him," observed Lady Horham. "Odd, isn't it?"

"I think it natural," murmured Mrs. Tracy. "I wish I had some one to tell *me* what to do."

"Well, buck-up!" said Polly Upperton.

"Emilia seems positively happy," said Mrs. Mundsley. "That's the strangest thing."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Chesterfield, who knew.

"Because she's free of Marcus, poor dear!" Mrs. Kington replied. "She says her holiday has really begun."

Lady Horham lifted her brows critically, suggesting

that she deemed Emilia's attitude reckless and frivolous.

"That's how Marcus is feeling now!" said Mrs. Upperton, pointing to the twisted crag which Emilia had represented in caricature. "I vote we re-christen the place Marcus's island. That's a tip for you, Carrie."

Mrs. Chesterfield glanced at the rock, then at her note-book in indecision. Could it be made a compliment?

"Don't, Polly. I wish you wouldn't," said Mrs. Tracy uneasily, "especially when I'm trying to forget it. It's hideously uncanny. We oughtn't to see it."

"See what?" asked Mrs. Upperton.

"The likeness, of course. It must mean something."

"Bosh!" retorted Mrs. Upperton. "It's just Marcus's effigy made in anticipation."

"It ought to be burnt, then," snapped Mrs. Kington. "Marcus is a beast for letting us in for this!"

But the opening chords of the piano broke the sultry stillness now deepening round the yacht, and the song began.

A great gull with a long hooked beak slackened his heavy flight as though wondering at the clear notes.

Before the song was over Mrs. Tracy was weeping furtively. Mrs. Mundsley grasped her hand to comfort her frailer friend. The others pretended to be unaware of a display of emotion which they thought in bad taste.

"I hate snivelling!" murmured Mrs. Upperton stoutly.

"I know I'm a fool," the young woman whispered to her friend, "but I do wish Billy were here!"

"Don't, dear!" said Mrs. Mundsley, squeezing her fingers. "Don't; it's silly."

The two sat, their deck-chairs touching, with clasped hands, thinking of their husbands.

"I never heard Emilia sing it so well," said Mrs.

Chesterfield. "In our anxieties," she wrote, "Miss Arden cheered us with her lovely voice."

"It's because she has all she wants!" said Mrs. Tracy meaningly. "I only wish I had. Strange how very, very fond one seems of people when one's away from them!"

"Dear old Billy!" said her heart. And she remembered with a pang the last time she had "been a brute to Billy."

"Thanks, Emilia!" Mrs. Chesterfield called to Miss Arden, who now appeared at the door of the music-room, of which the pale green hangings, nearly matching the colour of the sea in the eastern distance, hung in the oppressive stillness in moveless folds. "I never heard you sing so well before!"

"It's because she's so happy!" said Mrs. Kington, remembering their visit to Quirl that seemed ages ago. "She looks radiant!" she added.

The others glanced at Emilia, whose eyes were bright and cheeks flushed. What, they wondered, had Captain Norbert said?

Norbert stood behind her. Through the open ports they could see his thoughtful face outlined against the silk hangings. Evidently his satisfaction was taking a less joyful shape!

"It seems to me we're tempting Providence!" Mrs. Tracy complained to Mrs. Mundsley.

"Why, dearest?" asked her friend.

"Look at that awful rock! It will end in screaming at us! I never saw anything so—well, so sinister. I'm not superstitious, Helena, but one doesn't see such a thing without something horrid happening! It's a portent!"

"Fiddlesticks, Nellie! You're the most superstitious woman I know. Try to be like Polly Upperton, who believes in nothing of that sort."

"Polly Upperton has no soul!" said Mrs. Tracy. "She believes all mystics are mad!"

The weight of the day increased. The blue air grew faintly misty as though mixing with some

heavier and less innocent element. The island shone in the slanting sunbeams like burnished copper. The outline of "Marcus's Head," as they now called the rock, grew clearer and more menacing. The bank of clouds in the west lifted a dark shoulder above the rim of the sea. The restless spirit that had descended on the Eight Guests increased. They ceased to question the sailors because they dreaded the answer. Emilia's cheerful buoyancy alone defied the anxiety gathering round the yacht.

"How can you?" Mrs. Tracy asked her. "You know as well as I do that there is danger, but I've never seen you look so happy since we were at school!"

"Where's the danger?" asked Emilia.

"That awful head!" said the other. "It means . . . evil!"

"Oh, that! you wouldn't have seen it if I hadn't sketched it! How many years do you imagine it took the sun, the wind and the rain to carve that effigy of a great man? Every year it will grow more like him. All these years the great Artist has been waiting to show him his handiwork. Now it has got him it will have to keep him, for if the wind blows we shall have to go to the nearest port without him. We shall be all right!"

"Did Captain Norbert tell you that?"

"It's what I've gathered," said Emilia. "But look! What a sky!"

The rays of the sinking sun had thrown a deep red stain on the distant cloud-bank.

"How strange!" Emilia continued. "The clouds are hurrying on to reach the sun before the sea catches it. Which will win? Cloud or sea? If the sea wins we shall be lucky, if the clouds, well—we shan't. Heavens! what a sunset!"

And they gathered on the deck to watch a wonderful sight. Great crimson bars flung themselves across the west, vibrating and beating like fiery pulses in an agony of splendid pain. A saffron flush rushed up even to the zenith. The luminous fringe of the cloud-

bank glowed like the smoke of a furnace ; out of the fiery tumult of light, a band of frail and snowy air-erected shapes seemed fleeing in majestic panic. Before the splendour declined, the frowning bank of vapours below thrust forth a formidable arm, clutching the shuddering sun.

"Ah!" gasped Mrs. Tracy nervously, "the cloud has won!"

Here was another ominous portent!

Mrs. Chesterfield, note-book in hand, who had been ransacking her vocabulary for refulgent adjectives and stumbling over "lurid" in every other line, suddenly stopped.

"My dearest Nellie!" she protested. "If you get such wild ideas into your head, you'll end in making yourself ill!"

As she spoke, the sea stirred, the yacht quivered, a far-off growl of thunder broke the stillness.

"What's that?" exclaimed Mrs. Tracy, growing paler.

"Marcus swearing!" said Mrs. Upperton recklessly.

"Thunder," replied Norbert reassuringly. "It will cool the air and give our friends on shore the water they ought to want!"

"In these latitudes, I understand, thunderstorms are not uncommon," observed Mrs. Chesterfield sententiously.

"'Latitude!' how awful it sounds."

But although the distant rumble of thunder was repeated at intervals, the heavy calm remained unbroken.

As the sun sank, the darkness approached at a stride. The white tent on shore was dimly discernible, "Marcus's Head" became a dusky shape. On board, the electric lights were switched on. On shore, one solitary lamp blinked through the brief moment of twilight.

The group of women felt themselves cut off from their kind.

In the saloon, the steward—Hart had taken all but

one—was laying the dinner. But the *chef* was ashore. The dishes were cold. • The ice had given out. There was no bread. Fortunately champagne was forthcoming, and the wine, Norbert's quiet air of resolution, and Emilia's high spirit dispelled for awhile the nervousness of the other guests. No one dressed; the air of festivity had withered with the roses, but the azaleas took their thoughts away from the frowning, flowerless island, and the barren memories of the quietly heaving sea.

"The Enlighteners," said Mrs. Upperton, "must now tackle the funeral baked meats."

She glanced at Hart's vacant seat at the end of the table and wondered how he was dining. Through the open ports the glimmering light ashore sent them a cheerless message.

Such appetites as their anxieties had left them were soon appeased, and in less than three quarters of an hour they were on deck again, anxiously hoping for the splash of the returning oars. But darkness and silence, broken only by sea murmurs, surrounded them. Mrs. Tracy believed that she could hear Marcus's voice across the two miles of black sea, but this, as Mrs. Mundsley told her, was a feverish fancy.

And now the mass of cloud was swallowing up the western stars. On the island, the sea beat with a deeper murmur.

"Why doesn't it happen?" asked Mrs. Tracy.

"What?" asked Mrs. Upperton.

"What I feel coming," said the other.

On deck, Bates, two sailors, and a lad of about sixteen, kept watch.

Norbert came to them from time to time. All had been said that could be said. They could only wait till to-morrow. The barometer was still slowly falling. Bates hoped they might pass a quiet night.

At ten, Norbert asked Emilia to get the others to turn in. If the swell increased, which was quite possible, they would find themselves more comfortable lying down. He should keep watch on deck.

"Let me help you?" said Emilia.

"Only for a little while," he said.

"Only for a little while," she assented.

The others in the saloon spoke in low voices. There had been some talk of cards, but the spirit of bridge for once had deserted his handmaids; it seemed, as Mrs. Tracy said, scarcely the moment for trying to win each other's money!

"We shall wake up to-morrow morning and find one of the boats alongside, I feel we shall!" said Lady Horham.

"What you anticipate almost always happens!" Mrs. Chesterfield declared.

"When I feel it here!" said Lady Horham, touching her brows.

At this straw of prophetic comfort Mrs. Tracy clutched. "Some people," she reflected, "were like that!"

"What's Captain Norbert doing?" she asked.

"He means to watch with the men," Emilia answered.

This knowledge also soothed Mrs. Tracy. As a child she had always decreased her fears by hiding her head under the bed-clothes, which a long association of ideas still endowed with some mysterious protective powers.

"Then I think I'll go to bed," she said.

"Turn in!" Mrs. Upperton corrected.

"I'm afraid," Mrs. Tracy meekly continued, disregarding the interruption—"I'm afraid I'm too nervous for adventures of this kind. My nerves won't stand it. I must be a dreadful worry to you all."

"You *are* the weak spot in 'The Enlighteners,' pluck," said Mrs. Upperton, determined to maintain her own reputation for brisk courage; "but we forgive you, you know."

Then Mrs. Tracy distributed six kisses and retired.

"I'll look in and see she's comfortable," said Mrs. Mundsley.

So one by one the others departed, but Emilia returned to Norbert, who was pacing the deck.

How strange that she should be so happy! But for him she should be as terrified as poor Nellie Tracy.

Was it because the present was all she had, and something within her clutched at all the charm of it?

Passing through the music-room, where the lights were steadily burning, she noticed that an azalea was throwing out fresh buds. To-morrow they would be fully opened. Then closing the door, she joined Norbert.

"Have they turned in?" he asked.

"Yes."

"How is Mrs. Tracy?"

"As depressed as ever. She went to bed like a child, after being kissed all round. She was the same at school. Once when Helena—Mrs. Mundsley, you know—strained her ankle, Nellie, who adores her, cried all night, because she was sure she would never walk again!"

"I thought she was just—just," he hesitated, seeking the gentlest word for her weakness, "just one of the set."

"What? all surface-glitter and no heart? Poor dear, she's a woman like the rest of us!"

Then they paced the deck between the dark sea and dark star-dotted sky, with the island frowning on them like an implacable shadow.

How wonderful he had been, she thought, since they had been on board. Although he had not spoken a word of love, yet he had spread the consciousness of it about her like a net. Freed now from the oppression of Hart's malignant eye, her spirit rose with her daring. In that tense moment, it no longer seemed to her as it had seemed to her yesterday, that she had attained as much happiness as she deserved. The rumble of the distant thunder, the suspense of unknown danger, for the moment had no fears for her.

"Do trust me," she said at last, "and tell me what makes you so grave."

Then he told part of the truth.

He feared they might not reach England in time for him to begin his duties at the War Office. In that case, another man would probably be given the place, and he be called over the coals for being abroad without leave.

At this Emilia's conscience smote her. Her selfishness had made him come! Then an ugly thought awoke in her brain.

"Arthur!" she exclaimed, "do you think that man could be doing it on purpose?"

But Norbert scoffed at the idea. Hart would scarcely jam his boats on the rocks, imperil his yacht, and get himself into a tight place for the pleasure of spiting him!

He was sure one of the boats would be patched up to-morrow, and then, if arrangements weren't made to get him back in time, he would raise a mutiny on board.

His laughter was checked by an uneasy roll of the yacht. A troubled murmur across the sea followed it, and a glitter of lightning across the western horizon.

"The weather's going to change!" said Emilia, stirred by the first flicker of apprehension. As she spoke the thunder growled.

"Go down and see if they're all right," said Norbert.

Emilia went below to Mrs. Mundsley, and found her lying in her berth reading her Prayer Book.

"Oh, Emilia!" she exclaimed. "I heard it thunder, and the boat gave a ghastly heave. Is it coming on?"

Emilia did her best to reassure her, tucked her up and kissed her. Then she visited the others. Lady Horham and Mrs. Upperton, whose nerves were strong, were asleep. She closed their door silently and stole away. Mrs. Kington she found lying on

the couch in her dressing-gown "thinking," as she said, "and thinking!" She couldn't make up her mind whether to wear blue serge to-morrow. Serge was awfully hot, but then summer dresses seemed so awfully frivolous at such a time. What did Emilia think? Emilia advised her to go to sleep and decide when she woke up and found the boat alongside.

Mrs. Tracy was reading in her berth. Captain Norbert had lent her Wordsworth's *Sonnets*. If they produced no other effect they would help to send her to sleep, he had said. But her nerves were quivering, and the poems only made them vibrate with deeper emotion.

"O, Emilia!" she cried, as Emilia, entering gently, stood by the open door with the heavy curtain thrust aside, "listen to this! It seems me speaking to some one I'm fond of, although I've been 'surprised' by terror, not joy!" Then she murmured, with tears in her voice:—

"Surprised by joy, impatient as the wind,
I turned to share the transport. O! with whom
But thee, deep buried in the silent tomb,
That spot which no vicissitude can find?
Love, faithful love, recalled thee to my mind—
o. But how could I forget thee?"

Here she raised her eyes from the book and looked at Emilia.

"Yes! how could I forget the dear fellow, and be fool enough to come on this mad cruise! It's all very well for you, Emilia, who are not married, and with no one you particularly care for to worry about. But Billy never wanted me to come. He said, 'don't be a fool, old girl, you're only doing it for swagger!' But I came because every one was talking about it, and I thought it a smart thing to do—for I do hate being out of things so! But now I'm going to be punished! There! did you feel that? The yacht jumped like a frightened thing. Oh, if I ever get back again, Billy dear, I will be good to you, I will, I will!"

And Mrs. Tracy began to cry, and the big tears ran down her cheeks and fell on the pillow. But Emilia kissed, petted her, and laughed at her affectionately. She was going to help Captain Norbert watch on deck. If anything happened she would come and tell her. They seemed to be mending the boat on shore, and no doubt they would all be safely landed by lunch time. The night wasn't a bit stormy. Just a little sheet lightning, and every now and then a bigger swell than usual. And her stronger will and higher courage for the moment dispelled the fears gathering in the other's brain like grey gnats between the horns of a startled heifer. Finally, Emilia left her, promising she would go to sleep.

Next she knocked at Mrs. Chesterfield's door, and found her in her berth resolutely scribbling in her note-book.

Did Emilia think it would be in bad taste to say that they christened the biggest island rock "Marcus's Head," because its outline suggested (here she read from her notes) "the dark, energetic and masculine profile of their gallant leader"?

Emilia was sure that Mr. Hart would be flattered. Rocks were only like really great men. There seemed to be a provision of nature for that object. There were heads of Napoleon all over the Alps!

Mrs. Chesterfield said she would look up the point when she got home, and Emilia left her scribbling. Then, her duties of inspection over, she rejoined Norbert on deck.

They took two cushioned seats under the lee of the music-room. Here they sat side by side watching the island. The light near the shore was now brighter. Every now and then they fancied they could hear the sounds of a hammer, but the deepening growl of the tide against the rocks drowned all else when they listened.

"Dare I, or dare I not?" Emilia wondered. Tomorrow might be too late."

Until she dared they sat in silence. From the

engine-room came the steady throb and purring murmur of smoothly running machinery, the encouraging voice of the power watching over their safety. On the deck below they watched the glow of Bates's pipe, shining like a small restless spark; then their eyes fell on the lights reflected in the lapping waters and swinging in oily circles like folds of a luminous snake. From the west the clouds were approaching, swallowing up the stars one by one. At last, when silence grew to be a burden between them, he looked at her inquiringly, as one expecting or even challenging her to speak.

She had spoken boldly enough that afternoon at Quirl, why hesitate now?

As she looked back, Hart seemed responsible for her folly and weakness. Her hatred for him increased. Step by step he had established claims which all the rules of her world accepted as final. "Remember how deeply indebted you are to him, Emilia," the duchess had said just before she started. "Remember there are limits even to Mr. Hart's patience," her mother had repeated on the same day.

But what had been said to Arthur Norbert?

"Did the duchess mind your coming, Arthur?" she asked abruptly.

"She looks to me to protect her lambs against the dangers of the sea," he answered, smiling.

But this tone was too light for her to-night.

"But I know she said something about me, she always does," she continued.

"I gathered that I was expected to—well—to encourage what she expects to happen," he answered.

Then she made her leap. "Arthur!" she exclaimed, and the voice out of the darkness thrilled him, "I made you come to help me make up my mind. Nothing now will induce me to marry Mr. Hart."

Darkness and silence again. The yacht strained nervously at her cable; the sea moaned as though waking from a lethargy. Bates, knocking the ashes from his pipe, went to take counsel with Mackinnon.

Norbert's silence hurt her.

"Say something," she said. • "Tell me I'm right—that if I have been weak and contemptible he's so hateful. If you care for me, forgive me!"

Then he leant forward and took her in his arms. Lost in the joy and freedom of the moment she clung to him, soothed by caresses, promises of love, heedless of the future.

"It's Quirl again," she whispered, her cheek pressed against his, "but this time real and true."

At last the base bargains no longer shamed her. Marcus's reign was over, and she longed to tell him so.

A puff of hot wind smote the yacht, the cable creaked and swayed, the thunder rumbled nearer, but she was in his arms. This was her triumph, and in it the dark shadow of storm, stalking stealthily across the sea on the anchored yacht, was forgotten.

CHAPTER XXII

THE footsteps of Bates and Mackinnon recalled the lovers to reality. The dull handsome face of the seaman, bewildered by the weight of duties he was incapable of discharging, seemed to Norbert a true measure of their danger. Bates had been trying to toughen his resolution by rubbing it against the conceited pluck of the shrewd old Scot. To comfort himself Bates had promised that the storm would pass away to the south—a view neither Mackinnon nor the barometer shared. The engineer, who grasped the situation as fully as he dreaded it, had pointed out to the other that, so long as the weather came from the sou'-west, their anchorage might afford sufficient protection; but in the event of the wind changing, their peril might become extreme. "If I was you, mon," said Mackinnon, "I'd put to sea and let th' owner and skipper be damned for their godless folly!"

But Bates decided to await instructions.

"Then Lord help us if the wind shifts before morn," the other had replied.

It was after this discussion that the two men sought Norbert.

Seeing Emilia with him, they hesitated; Bates merely remarking that "it looked nastier than he liked," whilst Mackinnon observed that, loath as he was to frighten a leddy, he nevertheless ventured to say that no man could tell "what might na happen when an owner would ha' his own way in navigatin' his ain ship!" He sniffed resentfully at the hot wind which now struck the yacht fitfully. The long spell of fine weather through which they had been steaming on even keel ever since they left Southampton seemed

now yielding to the furtive attacks of a truculent foe. The roll of the sea increased, till now and again the spray splashed on deck. Chambers, the steward, who had joined the group, went below to see that the ports were closed. An agitated voice called, "Emilia!"

"It's Mrs. Tracy," she said; "I'll go to her."

She followed the steward across the rocking deck, and found Mrs. Tracy pale and ill, stretched in her berth, of which the stewardess had just closed the two ports; "but," murmured the sufferer, "not before the sea had jumped in at the window."

The movement of the sea was too frightful, and worse than ever. What was going to happen?

"We shall stay here till daybreak, and then put to sea," Emilia replied.

But here the horrors of sea-sickness claimed a shuddering and inarticulate victim. After the paroxysm, the poor lady sank back on her pillows with closed eyes. Others also succumbed. Under the weight of this misery, fear shrank to a dumb half-resigned dread, incapable of protest or action.

Emilia, at Mrs. Tracy's request, lay on the couch watching the pendent draperies swing with the rocking of the ship. She had fully grasped the simple sea-problem. When at last she fell into a restless sleep, consciousness of it penetrated her mind like a tremulous white light. Would the anchor hold? Would the wind change?

But at last the gloomy dawn broke across the troubled sea, and the watchers on the yacht again exchanged signals with the island. The situation had not improved. Even if the boat had been made sea-worthy, it was impossible, in the state of the tide, to launch her. Their orders were to stick to their anchorage as long as possible; if the wind should change, to steam north till the squally weather abated. Mackinnon got up steam, whilst Bates stood on the rocking deck watching the island through his glasses for signs of encouragement that were wanting.

Norbert sat alone in the music-room clinging to

a couch. Beyond the protected strip of water where the yacht lay, the broken crests of waves were leaping up at the louring sky. Outside their region of comparative calm, half a gale was blowing, but the ridge of hills, forming the backbone of the island, had so far saved them from a wind whose force could be measured by the tearing clouds above and the racing billows below.

Even to Norbert's inexperienced eye it seemed that *The Dawn* had been caught in a sea trap. To get up steam and steer a clear course between the reefs that edged the island was no mean feat for an expert skipper and a full crew. A blunder, a miscalculation on the part of the helmsman, might lead to disaster.

Moreover, it seemed to him that what Bates and the skipper ashore most feared, was about to happen. The white patches of foam seemed to be invading the narrowing area of protected water. The strain on the cable was increasing. Again Bates signalled for instructions. The reply came, "Put to sea."

With this news Norbert went below and comforted the ladies. They were put to sea. In a few hours they might run out of the bad weather. Then, overcome with giddiness, he flung himself on a couch and hid his swimming eyes in the pillow, whilst the yacht plunged like a frightened horse. Soon he heard the shriek of the steam, and felt the vibration of the engine. Mackinnon was at his work. Bates's voice shouted orders to the crew.

These men must be trusted; he was helpless.

Then, in a sort of half-lethargy, he heard the rush of the chain as the anchor was raised, and suddenly the sickening "kick-up," "swing-down," changed to a buoyant swirl as the screw beat the water. A few throbs more, and they reached the plunging sea in the van of a rising westerly gale.

To Norbert, stretched on the couch in the saloon, they seemed racing the tearing storm, descending into valleys or skimming green hissing hills in a welter of sea and sky.

Meanwhile Hart, standing on the island, watched the manœuvre with deep anxiety.

He knew they had had "an awful bucketing on board, and had the cheek taken out of them," but any gratification which this might have procured him had been swallowed up by the extreme discomfort of his own position on what he grimly called "a few square miles of blasted rock," the consciousness that his experiment had miscarried, and the risks to which his splendid yacht was exposed under an incompetent navigator. Then West was annoying him! "Rubbing it in," Hart called it.

"You ought to have left me aboard as I said," repeated the skipper for the tenth time. "Bates has no more idea where he's steering than you have! A nice story to tell against a man of my reputation and experience. Serve me right for listening to you, Mr. Hart, that's what it does."

Hart growled and cursed. Why didn't they fly as many signals of distress as they could find flags for, and let off rockets and fire guns? His experience was that the longer and louder a man shouted, the likelier he was to be heard. In any case the yacht would come back for them.

"Will she?" asked the skipper grimly. "Seems to me if they get out of this they won't be in too great a hurry to return. Trust Captain Norbert and those ladies to come back and look for us! Trust 'em! I know what human nature is. I don't wish to make myself unpleasant, Mr. Hart, especially when we've brought trouble on ourselves, but it's no good blinking at it! We've been had! Luck was dead against us. The worst part of our blessed experiment has been on ourselves. Passengers, confound 'em, have all the luck—at least, that's my experience. You should have done as I said. The skipper who leaves his ship deserves all he gets, that's my mistake—that is! I allowed myself to be overruled, Mr. Hart, and now we've to pay for it."

"I've to pay for it, you mean," growled Marcus.

"Goodness knows how much, too," retorted the skipper. "It depends on them," and he pointed to *The Dawn* as she disappeared behind the curve of the island.

"You haven't the infernal impudence to tell me my own yacht won't come back and take me off this b—— island," screamed Marcus.

"They'll come back when it suits them, or if it suits them," replied the skipper, who feared no man, and who had already ceased to respect his employer. "Captain Norbert's in a hurry to get home, and with you and me here, he'll run the show to his liking—unless I greatly mistake my gentleman. They'll reach Las Palmas or Teneriffe and pick up a steamer for home—that is, if 'the Ornament' can navigate her there, which is doubtful. They'll leave us to find the treasure. Captain Norbert told me that would take us all our time! He'll be for giving us plenty of time! So will that old Scotch dog Mackinnon! As for that man Bates, well, Bates is putty!"

And thus Hart was forced to see the truth. It was too bad even for swearing, so he turned aside, scrambled over the yellow sand and rocks to the lee of the crag where his tent was pitched, and, throwing himself on the cushions, tried to sleep. He might as well have tried to fly! A nice story of his treasure-hunt this! A fine improvement on Low's method of teaching insolent females what was due to a gentleman! A pretty sort of fellow Marcus would look when Altenstein came to him for the story—if he ever got back to tell it!

But if Marcus had left everything he wanted on board his yacht—now a frail wreath of smoke in the troubled sky—he had brought his jealousy ashore with him.

Emilia, the infernal coquette, was with Norbert! Norbert was making love to her. She meant him to! Norbert would be the hero among the ladies, he (Marcus) the blundering laughing-stock.

Then he perceived how he ought to have set to

work. The guests should have been landed first with everything they didn't want, and a couple of stewards and two of the crew. Then they might have got their lesson, and Marcus have enjoyed his experiment! His mistake was to have been in too great a hurry.

He wanted to smoke, and there were no cigars on shore. He wanted "a drink," and the whisky had been purposely forgotten! For the first time in his life, since he had entered into his own as a man of wealth, he found himself unable to gratify a single one of his inclinations. What an experience! It was hell! just hell!

How long would it last? Why the devil didn't that sulky skipper do something to get him out of it instead of jeering at him?

Marcus scrambled to his feet and rolled out of his tent in a fury. The high wind was whirling the yellow dust in feverish and thirsty circles. From the surging dun-coloured clouds no rain fell on the parched heap of calcined rock, although grey streaks far away to the west and north showed that the skies could shed their burden elsewhere.

"A nice sort of treasure I've found," muttered Marcus. "Just a fragment baked in hell!"

Then his grim sense of humour stirred, and he grinned as an ape might grin at its own misfortunes. The skipper was right. They'd been had. Not by fate, but by the only deity Hart recognized—luck!

Marcus now admitted that he must make the best of defeat. Instead, therefore, of quarrelling with the skipper, as he had at first intended, he drank a cup of tea made with boiled soda-water and condensed milk, and settled down, as he said, to play Robinson Crusoe as well as he could.

Meanwhile *The Dawn*, instead of running from the tempest, was meeting its full fury. The last those on board saw of the island was a big signal of distress flying from the top of "Marcus's Head."

CHAPTER XXIII

WHENEVER the forces of nature and the artificial human element which accepts the normal for the certain are brought into conflict there follows a melancholy shattering of man's pride. Fear of sudden and violent death scatters the dusts of our vanities as the winds whirl straws and feathers into the dark.

In escaping from one trap *The Dawn* had run into another. In seeking to avoid the storm she found its furious centre. For many hours the yacht staggered through the blind hurricane, torn and smitten by its rage. The seven shuddering women lay back helplessly on their pillows, whilst the sea swept the decks in thunder, and the white foam leapt across the ports in cataracts of green light. Most of them were too utterly exhausted with sea-sickness to stir; but even Emilia and Mrs. Chesterfield, who suffered the least, feared to move in the crash of broken furniture and loosened fittings flung savagely from side to side as they plunged and wallowed in the terrible seas. Undermanned and badly navigated, the fine boat seemed to all aboard the helpless victim of the tempest. Tons of water were shipped, the sides were swept and battered, the music-room threatened to be swept away every time the surf struck it; the cabins and the saloon were awash, and the tragic damp that haunts sea-caves at half-tides conquered the costly comfort, twenty-four hours before its owner's pride. But what was happening on deck none of the guests knew. At one time they seemed to lie motionless broadside to the waves, whilst the exposed screw whirled in a mad turmoil of disaster; at another a

mighty wave hurled them up to the lowering skies. At last the roar, confusion and terror crushed even the terror in their souls. At the stroke of every great wave the water tumbled with a heart-chilling splash into the saloon, invading their sleeping places and drowning the scented luxury.

Now and again a woman shrieked, but the roar hid their feeble moans, and for the most part they lay half-unconscious whilst the storm roared without and splashed and gurgled within.

Emilia was flung from the couch in Mrs. Tracy's cabin, where she was clinging, into the water that had soddened the carpet, and tumbled backwards and forwards in an insolent torrent with every plunge of the ship. In her dazed brain glimmered the vague stories of all the wrecks of which she had ever read. Memory, by some ghastly perversion of mind, seemed as actual as the dread experience. Whilst she remembered the heroic story of the *Birkenhead*, which she had read when a child, she also recalled the miserable fate of the packet-boat lately lost near Jersey, whilst all the time it seemed that they lay between the jaws of a relentless and malevolent monster mumbling them for pastime before it crushed out their life. Mrs. Tracy, in the soaking bedclothes, lay unconscious from sickness and terror. The stewardess, who at first had made some effort to assist the helpless ladies, had been flung across the saloon and lay sick and half stunned, wedged in one of the fixed seats, whilst the water washed round her ankles, and the blood dripped from a wound in her forehead. Norbert, driven from the music-room by the blows of the waves, and unable to stand on deck where the men were lashed, finding her lying unconscious, had with difficulty placed her there. There had, he knew, been other and more serious accidents. One man had been swept overboard; another, driven against the deck-house, had been badly injured. And now the unbuoyant movement of the boat and the repeated blows of the pursuing waves suggested that some-

thing was amiss. Bates and the men on deck, Mackinnon in the engine-room, were making the best fight they could, but both were beginning to fear that they would not weather the storm when Emilia, dazed and soaking from the fall, burst in clinging to the brass rods.

"We're going down!" she said in a voice scarcely audible through the roar of the storm and the crash of the great seas. The hopes and fears of ordinary life had vanished. Life under this dread aspect seemed brother to death. It no longer appeared unnatural to either that they should be tossing in a hurricane in an unmanageable yacht. Familiar things seemed vanished for ever. In Norbert's mind one resolution was uppermost: he must die like a man. He had faced death once before on the Indian Frontier, and now remembered how the same desire had braced him then. Memories rushed through his brain in a torrent to vanish in the agony of the present.

"We're going down, Arthur!" Emilia repeated. He held her in his arms and clung with her to the rail as the yacht leant over to an angle at which her decks were almost awash with the sea. The suspense seemed endless. Would she right herself? Suddenly the yacht with a great quiver and a mighty crash swung back. The mast, which had pointed to the horizon, pointed again to the sky. A roaring cataract of green water poured off the reeking deck.

Then for a moment the crash and din ceased, and they noticed that the water in the saloon seemed deeper. The momentary respite by contrast resembled silence. The stewardess moaned. Leaving Emilia, Norbert made her swallow the last drop of brandy in his flask. Chambers, the steward, with a white face, dripping with water, splashed down to the saloon.

"Mackinnon says the water in the engine-room will put out the fires," he said. "My Gawd!"

Then he told them rapidly how they had been swept by three great seas in succession. Whilst he

was speaking another broke over the disabled yacht and plunged with a roar to her recesses through torn decks, broken hatches and smashed skylights.

Undermanned and badly navigated, they had not had the time, if they had had the forethought, to take the usual measures.

"It was too much for Mr. Bates," added Chambers with a wan smile, clinging to the table, which in the wrecked saloon alone stood firm.

And now they heard the hissing of steam as the water which the damaged yacht had swallowed, and was still swallowing through a dozen wounds, rose in the engine room. The man seemed in a dream.

"A grand boat for the Solent," he muttered, "but unfit for this bucketing." Then he sat on the table.

The stewardess, revived by the brandy, was saying a prayer. Fragments of the words reached them through the hollow roar of the waters within and without. Amid the murky horror of the moment, it seemed to Emilia that of what was happening her memory held some mysterious pre-knowledge. Then her mind, dizzily analyzing experience in the dimmest shadows of reflection, perceived that the impression was but the accumulated recollection of all that she had read of the sea. "If I must die," she thought, "I'll try not to die in a panic."

She looked at Norbert to see what she could gather from his face. He was pale and his eyes seemed shrunken, but the look of abject terror which she had seen in others was wanting.

Yesterday she remembered he had told her they were all "over-civilized and unstrung!" Now they were going down together. The thought removed some of the horror of the threatened death. It seemed the fitting and dramatic end to a comedy of which some brutal turn of a screw in the machinery of destiny had made a tragedy. Then a black thought wiped out this sentimental comfort as false, vulgar, and belonging to the theatre. In the twilight of benumbed emotions she forgot having harboured it.

"I wish to God, Arthur, I had never made you come!" she cried in his ear whilst the water rushed round her knees in an eddy every time the yacht lurched. Then to her relief she saw his face lighten.

"I'm glad I'm here, dearest girl," he said. "It's not all over yet."

As he spoke he kissed her. The storm-battered steward watched them with dull eyes.

They seemed alone in a primitive world, untouched by human convention and unexplored by familiar experience.

Then she was conscious that she was sitting by the steward on the table, which rose above the drenched saloon like a mahogany island.

Suddenly she heard him say, "Damned if that b—— screw ain't stopped!" His words caused her neither surprise nor resentment: fear had flung them back on the savage human elements out of which polished society has most painfully been evolved. The stewardess heard him too.

"If you'd say a prayer, Thomas Chambers, instead of swearing, it might be better for you."

But if the man heard her, the meaning of her words never reached his understanding.

And now Emilia remembered that Norbert had left her to see the others. Should she follow him? If they sank she was determined to sink in his arms. There was always the remote, shadowy, almost unthinkable chance that they "might wake up suddenly together."

Then she felt her self-reliance falling to the vanishing point, as though she were a little child who feared going to bed in the dark. Without knowing that she called, she cried, "Arthur! Arthur!"

The man beside her heard her, but his heavy, troubled eyes, haggard with want of sleep, showed no surprise.

Her cry brought Norbert back.

"Don't leave me," she said, "because—when it comes I want you near me!"

When he soothed her.

"But it won't come!" he said resolutely. "The wind is falling. Listen."

"Cos the bloomin' fires 'ave been put out!" said the steward, relapsing to nature and an earlier vocabulary.

Norbert looked at him.

"Make yourself useful, Chambers, and get me a bottle of brandy at once!"

The tone of authority called the man from the apathy into which he had fallen—a state in which reason no more directs conduct than in a nightmare. Emilia saw another look come into the man's face, expelling wide-eyed vacancy as he obeyed, and splashed to his storeroom.

"The engines are not working," said Norbert.

Outside the green lights fell on them in regular flashes as the stricken yacht rose and fell in the trough of the seas.

Looking through the ports as a wave fell, Emilia saw the sun emerge from a cloud in the west and throw a trail of pale light along the black heaving sea. Then she perceived that the yacht was gradually sliding down in the direction of the sinking sun. The water collected in a pool on the left side of the saloon, on the right side the pattern of the beautiful Persian carpet became visible.

What did it mean? Were they settling down? Would *The Dawn* heel over and disappear with a horrible gurgle and plunge? What happened when ships sank?

"Look! what does it mean?" she asked.

"It needn't mean that," he answered.

Slowly the list increased. The stern of the yacht began imperceptibly to rise.

In the west was a growing patch of pale blue sky. The low sun now shone through the watery space; the violence of the wind was decreasing, but the seas still broke over the yacht. At every blow and after every splash it seemed her buoyancy grew less.

But Chambers returned with the brandy and a glass. It was plain from the colour in his face that he had comforted himself first.

Then from inundated cabin to cabin, where the others were lying, Norbert and Emilia went bestirring what comfort they could.

The storm was over; it was true the engines had stopped working for the moment, and the water they had taken in had given the yacht an ugly list, but the worst had passed and all would soon be well!

This Norbert repeated with all the comforting conviction at his command. As the furious plunging of the ship decreased, panic abated among the nerve-shattered and broken women, too weak and weary to whimper.

Chambers, the steward, bestirred himself. Biscuits, the only dry food obtainable, were distributed, and some effort made to meet the situation with practical fortitude.

"Even if they must all be drowned they needn't be drowned hungry!" said Norbert.

On deck Norbert found Bates and Mackinnon. The former, worn out with the struggle and stupefied with want of sleep, had given over to despair. All he could hope was that "she'd keep afloat." Mackinnon and his men, washed out of the engine-room, were scarcely more hopeful. Bates had no idea where they were. The worst of it was that the pumps wouldn't work, and she was sucking in water like a sponge.

"She's na doin' that an' she willna sink!" growled Mackinnon contemptuously over the whisky bottle. "Deescipline's been washed o'erboard as we've been washed out o' the engine-room. Weel! weel! let it go, lads! There's no crew an' there's no skipper, and I'd as lief be drowned asleep. An' in any case she'll float till morn!"

The weary sea-beaten men were seeking the cheapest and unworthiest solace.

Above the sky had cleared, the crescent of the new

moon appeared over the edge of the dark sea. The yacht, which formerly traced itself a gallant and graceful shape against the night, outlined in electric light, was now a helpless bulk blinking at the dim heaving swell with a few feeble lanthorns. But now that her pride was broken and her beauty gone, the skies once more began to smile on her. The night airs once more grew balmy, and silence, stealing across the long heaving sea, came to them almost as a caress.

CHAPTER XXIV

AS morning broke not a breath of wind ruffled the sea, now heaving languidly as though in quiet sleep after an outburst of vindictive fury. When the sun rose above the horizon the shattered yacht, in all the disarray of wreckage and defeat, drifted helpless in the golden path. Having won his victory and captured his prey, the sea seemed waiting—for what?

The Eight Guests, in a haggard group, gathering on sloping brine-drenched planks behind the ruined deck-house, waited too.

The waves, sweeping the decks, had burst the doors and smashed the piano; the walls were reeking with sea-damp, but this was the one place in the ship that now bore some resemblance to what it had been when they left Southampton. Although half the roof had been wrenched off by the crash of the waves from above and below, a few dripping silk hangings still drooped from the bent and twisted rails, and the soddened carpet still adhered to the floor.

When, in the wan light, before the sun's rim touched the edge of the horizon, Emilia Arden stole here alone, the wrecked music-room seemed a symbol of the change within her soul from which the storm had swept all familiar thoughts and hopes except a passionate desire of life. The music-book she had brought with her lay in a soddened heap, crushed in a corner by the overturned piano—a pathetic token of a despairing conflict.

Life seemed reduced to its simplest sum. Could it be prolonged? Or would the water-logged yacht suddenly, with a heave and a plunge, disappear in the sea? A half water-logged yacht might sink at

any minute. There had been some talk of making a raft, but the idea for the moment had been abandoned.

In the lower regions of the yacht she heard the water lapping in hollow murmurs, to and fro, as they stirred languidly in the gently heaving sea.

Norbert now concealed nothing from them. They all knew that, unless some passing ship saw their signals of distress and rescued them, sooner or later the yacht would surely sink. Hope of life had shrunk to so frail a thread! This thought her quick mind revolved till her senses ached.

When the Eight Guests gathered together in the slanting sunbeams fear of death lay on them like an icy weight.

Around them was a vast circle of blue and purple sea; gulls, with dove-coloured wings edged with black, circled over them in the sunny air; the grimy, unkempt men from the engine-room, the sailors (still in their neat blue jerseys), the weary Bates, the grim and silent Mackinnon, his head still swimming with fumes of alcohol—all anxiously watched the lonely sea. They saw purple shadows, a school of rollicking porpoises, solitary sea-birds winging their way through the golden morning, but not a smoke-wreath, not a glimmer of a topsail over the horizon's rim.

As the sun rose, drinking the cool of the morning, the heat grew heavy. The wet clothing dried, the drenched planks became white with incrustated salt, the list slightly increased. Tea and biscuit were served out, and the ladies sat on cushions under the shadow of the deck-house looking at the horizon. Life for many hours past, looked back on, seemed a long inarticulate agony of fear, misery and exhausting sickness. Terror now assumed a mild aspect, hidden behind the limpid serenity of the morning. They lay on the slanting deck silent for the most part, broken with weariness, penned in helplessly between hope and despair. Their very identities appeared changed,

the familiar, comfortable life of luxury and frivolity seemed far away.

Norbert, moving restlessly about, now conferring with Mackinnon, now with Bates, now with Chambers, came to comfort them every few minutes. The chances, he insisted, were all in their favour. If the calm continued they were certain to be saved.

And gradually a confidence which he was unable to share descended upon them as their joint stock of hope increased under his unflagging encouragement.

At last, as the morning wore on, they gazed about them with less unnatural eyes.

"Emilia," said Mrs. Kington, breaking a long silence, "is the only one of us not too awful-looking for words!"

This was the first voice in the vernacular from their familiar world.

Then they looked at each other, and what they beheld showed the complacent artificial heights from which they had been tumbled.

"We are the ghosts of ourselves," murmured Mrs. Tracy.

"How we should have laughed—once," said Mrs. Upperton, glancing at Lady Horham and Lady Chesterfield, whose neglected heads were wrapped in shawls.

Suddenly Mrs. Tracy began to weep.

"Don't, Nellie, don't," said Mrs. Mundsley. "The men will see you. Captain Norbert says we must set them a good example."

But Mrs. Tracy continued to weep, till Mrs. Mundsley's damp lap was wet with her hidden tears.

"It's worst of all for me," she sobbed. "I came against Billy's wish. He said I was a fool, and should regret it. Oh, Billy, Billy, Billy! I do, I do!"

"Come! come!" said Lady Horham resolutely, "this is foolish."

Yet this relapse to tears seemed a comfort to all of them, conveying them as it did by association to those

regions of gentle sorrow whence they had been driven by the intensity of their terrors.

Norbert, discussing prospects with Bates, glancing back at the group of women, deeply pitied them. Their very faces had undergone a mysterious change. Lady Horham and Mrs. Chesterfield, who had always impressed him as handsome, stately and admirably dressed matrons, had shrunk away to haggard, wrinkled middle-aged women. The change in them seemed almost as great as in the sea-battered music-room against whose damaged sides they were leaning. His eyes wandered regretfully from one to another.

How driven, sunk and sad they looked now!

All Mrs. Kington's colour had disappeared. Her once vermilion lips were pale and drooping, her cheekbones had become prominent, on her feet a pair of felt shoes several sizes too large protruded uncouthly from a wet serge skirt. All vanities had been flung aside as soldiers in a panic fling aside their accoutrements!

Something must be done for them. Anything was better than loafing helplessly waiting to go down—if go down they must.

He called Chambers. Bates roused himself. An effort was made to clear out the music-room. Across the torn roof a sailcloth was stretched. All the smashed furniture, except the piano, which was too heavy to lift, was removed and flung overboard.

Emilia picked up her wet and crumpled music and placed it to dry in the sun. She was, she said, sure to want it again some day.

"These shall be your quarters," said Norbert with resolute cheerfulness; "you'll be all right here till we meet a ship. You, Mrs. Chesterfield, can go on with your book. You'll find lots to write about. Some one will have to tell our story."

And when the music-room had been prepared for them they entered obediently, making themselves as comfortable as they could.

"Oh, Emilia! he is a dear fellow!" said Mrs. Mundsley in a low voice. "How I do congratulate

you! No wonder you keep up through it all as you do."

"I could too," whimpered Mrs. Tracy, "if Billy were here."

They were now shaded against the torrid heat beating down on the wreck. If they chose they could draw a canvas curtain across the doorway. A profound calm had settled down on them—so deep and silent that the water in the wreck scarcely gurgled or splashed, though its presence and its menace was ever felt.

And here they remained quietly for some time, speaking in low voices of what they had gone through, of their hopes, their fears, and their regrets; all the petty spites and small artifices quenched. Mrs. Mundsley no longer believed Mrs. Kington "really" tried to cheat at bridge; Mrs. Upperton forgot she had told Marcus that Mrs. Kington "made up" badly and "carried on with men recklessly;" Nellie Tracy repented having told Helena Mundsley that Emilia's "double game" with Captain Norbert and Marcus Hart was a piece of awful effrontery on the part of a young unmarried woman which could only end in disaster. The womanly bond between them growing tender ceased to be critical. Lady Horham and Mrs. Chesterfield, both mothers, thought of their sons and their own vanished youth, of their efforts to swim in the same stream with women with ten times their money or twice their good looks. What wasted effort for mean prizes! What man vaguely calls repentance was busy in their hearts. If only they got out of it, how good they would be!

At last Emilia, who had been soothing Nellie Tracy, left them to find Norbert, still sweeping the horizon with his glass.

The contrast between Emilia's neat appearance and her own suddenly struck Mrs. Kington. "At any rate," she said with a flash of natural flippancy, "I needn't be drowned in these!" and she looked at the list slippers disgracing her feet.

"I really do think we might prune up a bit!" said Lady Horham.

"So do I. It's the only way we can set an example to the men," said Mrs. Mundsley, with a glimmer of that self-consciousness which never allowed her to cease wondering what impression she was making on a not always observant world.

"It's different for Emilia," repeated Mrs. Tracy, who was most dejected; "she has Captain Norbert to comfort her."

"My dear!" said Lady Horham, "I don't think you ought to say that and at such a moment."

"Nellie isn't blaming Emilia, only envying her," said Mrs. Mundsley.

"Why, I would try to dress myself if Billy were here, wouldn't I, Emilia?" asked Mrs. Tracy.

"Of course you would, darling!" replied her friend.

Then the women, stirred by a weak eddy from their far-off familiar life, gazed at one another strangely, whilst Mrs. Chesterfield, wondering pitifully what the General would do without her and whether, as she feared, he would marry again, feebly smiled.

"Call Emilia," said Mrs. Tracy; "she'll see what can be done!"

Then Mrs. Upperton rose from the cushions in the angle of the music-room between the broken piano and a smashed pillar, and, looking out of the gloom up the deck into the blazing sunshine, called, "Emilia! Emilia, please!"

Then Emilia came.

"We want," said Mrs. Upperton, "to make ourselves look decent if we can."

"As a sort of example to the men," added Mrs. Mundsley.

"And because you set us the example, my dear!" said Lady Horham.

The difficulty was that all but two of the lower deck cabins were under water, and of these one had been given over to the injured stewardess and the other to

two of the crew, one of whom, suffering from concussion of the brain, lay unconscious, watched by the other suffering from a broken leg, which Mackinnon had tried to set.

With the help of the men, however, some soaked portmanteaus, various dressing-bags, and not a few articles of sea-drenched clothing were brought up from below, and for several hours the women had something to occupy their minds. At one o'clock biscuits and potted meats provided them with a meal resembling lunch. A few bottles of champagne were found undamaged or unbroken amidst the destroyed stores, for the bulkheads had given way under pressure of the water, and of the luxuries with which the yacht was packed when they left Southampton most had been spoilt.

Food and wine, the serenity of the weather, the fact that the wreck showed no signs of settling deeper in the water, helped still more to restore the hopes of the women. As the day wore on, and the tropical sun dried the sea damp from their rescued but shrunken clothing, one after the other of them reappeared from the music-room, clothed, as Mrs. Kington observed, if not in their right minds.

The day stole on through long hours of glowing heat till evening brought a cooler waft of air from the south-west, and the drooping flag, which had hung motionless at the inclined masthead, rustled its languid folds.

They watched the sun sink below the horizon, the lights pale, and darkness steal into the east. With darkness fear came on them again. All day long the barren sea had not revealed the shadow of a distant sail or the dimmest reek of smoke.

Throughout the night, under the pale light of a few oil lamps, the watch in turns looked out for the lights of passing steamers, but the dark empty spaces of the sea heaved in unbroken and remorseless loneliness.

CHAPTER XXV

FOR two days and two nights the wreck drifted, turning helplessly in the tides and currents, at one time with her low bows pointing to the sunset, at another to the dawn. The sun beat down on her all day, a crescent moon shone on her at night, whilst the sea solitudes heaved around, untouched by a wandering sail, unstained by a wreath of longed-for smoke.

The night seemed unending, the long hours of the hot listless day brought only the relief of light.

The injured stewardess became light-headed; the sailor suffering from concussion continued unconscious, the man with the broken leg was carried on deck, where he lay dejectedly under a ragged awning.

The care of the sufferers was undertaken by Lady Horham and Mrs. Chesterfield; the discussion of these "cases" alone broke the oppressive and anxious monotony brooding over the thoughts of the women driven to explore the recesses of their thoughts by the sense of solitude and danger, by the fierce and desolate lights beating on the calm sea, by the hollow murmurs muttered by the water-logged wreck at night. They seemed balanced on frail threads in a vacant world that was unconscious of their very existences, and whence, at any moment, they might drop into completest oblivion. The vast trap had closed in on them in stagnant solitude and blue luminous horizons. Elegant and selfish parasites hitherto protected by the complex scheme of life by which they were produced, their quickened imagin-

ations revolving through regions of thought never touched before, were now gathering some inkling of true values.

They were learning that, in the great scheme of things, their importance was no greater than that of the sea-birds that had left them, or of the dolphins, frolicking a moment before disappearing in the purple shadow of the hull.

Sometimes at night, alone in the deck-house where they now slept, they talked of this with half-stifled sighs. Mrs. Kington, who felt the oppression most, described it as "the contempt of nature for useless women." They had tried, she said, to make a world for themselves beyond the ugly, difficult and unpleasant things of life, to accept of what it offered only what they chose. And now this had come!

"As a lesson, I hope," observed Lady Horham.

"It won't be a lesson unless we get out of it," Mrs. Mundsley murmured half-resentfully. "If we're not saved, it will be just wasted torture." •

"They say nothing is wasted," said Mrs. Chesterfield, "it's only—well—preparation."

"Preparation for what?" asked Mrs. Upperton peevishly.

But this question no one cared to answer. It was too near the final dread.

Close at hand, near their pillows, lay their life-belts. Through the torn sides of the deck-house they could see the great stars on their eternal courses, and measure their progress across narrow spaces of naked sky. They were near the simple and primitive movements of the world that awed them. Death, a few days before, a shadowy and remote thought, now seemed as much part of the dread unheeding scheme about them as darkness and light. Of what account were their ambitions now?

Outside, they heard the murmurs of voices which brought them some comfort. Emilia Arden was "helping Captain Norbert watch." But in the shattered region of altered perspectives, this caused

no smile or sterile worldly comment. They knew of the engagement.

"If," said Mrs. Mundsley, breaking a long silence, "we ever get out of it, they will be married."

"How lovely for them!" sighed Mrs. Tracy. "If Billy——" but she checked herself. An attitude of stoicism was now recognized among them as the only one possible, for attitudes were a part of their lives.

"They'll be awfully poor!" said Mrs. Upperton, suddenly forgetting.

"What will being poor matter—after this?" exclaimed Mrs. Kington.

"I wonder what the papers are saying about us?" said Mrs. Upperton, who loved publicity, and cultivated the acquaintance of society-paragraphists, whom she invited to tea.

"I wonder what they will say if they never hear of us again at all?" asked Mrs. Kington.

Mrs. Chesterfield sighed audibly; Lady Horham stirred uneasily, but no one answered the question. In the vast and vacant spaces which had engulfed them were no publicity, no regrets, no tears, no consciousness, only the sequence of unheeding laws. At any moment a cloud might darken the west, the sea leap, and end the work of destruction still incomplete.

"What's that?" exclaimed Mrs. Tracy anxiously; for the wreck had heaved suddenly, whilst the waters in the saloon below them gurgled hungrily.

"It's nothing!" replied Mrs. Kington fearfully, clutching at her life-belt.

"Just a gentle movement of the sea, that's all," said Mrs. Chesterfield, who, having been nearly shipwrecked in the Red Sea on her way to India, was regarded as an authority.

Then, hearing the voices again, they were reassured and strove to sleep. A few minutes later they were aroused by a glitter and flare, followed by a swift whizzing sound.

It was Bates appealing for help to the implacable darkness. Springing from their pillows, they hurried through the canvas screen, life-belts in hand. Was there help at last?

Disappointment, heavy and black, descended on them.

A man thought he had seen a light above the horizon—a man who yesterday had stupefied himself with whisky; the rocket had been fired, on the chance of attracting some watchful eye scanning the sea in other dark circles below their own. But all was black and silent in a great calm. The crescent moon had disappeared; there were no lights but the wheeling stars. An hour more, and the first streaks of dawn would bar the east with crimson, so with heavy hearts they returned to the deck-house, where broken sleep helped them once more to the glare and weariness of another day.

When it had dawned, and courage was at its lowest, Mrs. Chesterfield, still keeping notes, told them that it was now more than seventy-two hours since the engines had ceased working. Seventy-two hours! And what hours! Their imprint lay like masks of fatigue and fear on the faces of these nervous, highly-strung women. Except Emilia Arden, the younger ones showed it most. Cheeks were thin and drawn, eyes hollow and sad; though there were flashes of petulance and vivacity, or faint gleams of a quenched vanity, silences grew longer as hope receded. "Just like a lot o' poor butterflies at sea!" said Bates, eyeing them pitifully. "Puir deevils," muttered Mackinnon, "for even coloured flies ha' their uses."

But the women were not yielding without a struggle. Although there was no audience but themselves, step by step they had decided that "the right thing" was to ignore what was threatening. When they heard ugly murmurs from the creeping waters below, their shudders were no longer expressed in fearful questionings of the men.

"We always do it in the world," said Mrs. Mundsley.

"Why not here? It's civilization. That is our badge. Let's wear it to the end."

Thus the love of attitudes, the protective equipment of their class and set, was not discarded even now. A certain standard was aimed at, complex and contradictory, but, as it seemed to them, fit as a last resource for twentieth-century souls. The spirit out of which the Enlighteners' Club had sprung was not yet dead.

Mrs. Chesterfield—the least ill-read—and there were moments when their joint stock of ignorance surprised even themselves, told them how the aristocrats during the Terror had passed their last days in prison, waiting for the tumbrils, the executioner, or a reprieve.

This was their Terror. Were not they too awaiting execution or reprieve? Any moment might bring the one or the other. In such parallels, in tags of remembered poetry about womanly courage, in unspoken sentimental memories showing the beauty of heroic death, artificial solace was sought and found. The majestic radiance of sea and sky seemed to give a tragic splendour to the end approaching.

And always there was tea, a stock of condensed milk, biscuits, tinned-food, mineral waters, and a little wine. Water was heated in spirit-lamps—from which the flames in the blazing sunshine flickered like a pale mist—"Symbol of our frail hopes," wrote Mrs. Chesterfield in her notes, now growing in volume. If the worst came, they were to be enclosed in a bottle and addressed to her publisher. Should they ever reach him the General would reap the reward. This thought buoyed her whilst the scribbling diverted her thoughts from the circle of their fears.

But at last the warning came.

On the morning of the third day, a splash and roar of waters was heard below, followed by a bursting crash. The wreck swayed, and for a moment seemed settling down. The stern, which had been raised, now sank towards the level horizon; they rolled heavily several times, and before the movement ceased, the women, blind with terror, forgetful of all their heroic

resolutions, clutched one another, death-pale with panic-strained eyes. Life-belts were seized; preparations made to heave overboard the tangle of spars and wooden gratings lashed together as a desperate last resource on which to float, after the yacht should sink. Wild shrieks arose, Emilia clung to Norbert, as, in this moment of soul-numbing suspense, the drops of her courage ebbed away. When the shifting equilibrium of the now water-logged wreck adjusted itself, the list was no longer perceptible, but the loss of buoyancy was apparent, and the top of the deck several feet nearer the lapping sea. The smallest foam-flecked wave would now sweep over the torn bulwarks. The stroke of a lusty billow, and they would founder! So frail had grown their hold on security.

Five dreadful minutes passed whilst Mackinnon and Bates inspected the wreck. They brought back word that several bulkheads had burst and flooded the compartments aft of the saloon.

The stewardess, now in high fever with erysipelas, and the other sick were brought up and placed on the deck. The sailor suffering from concussion muttered uncouth sounds; the woman who was light-headed moaned in the dazzling sunshine. For the first time the sufferers seemed a burden—wrecked fragments of humanity—past hope and almost past pity. Selfish fear was hardening the hearts of women wont a few days ago to remind each other that they were Enlighteners.

But gradually a certain level of sickening calm was produced in their minds. The sailors reassured them. There was no reason why they shouldn't float for hours if the fine weather held. About them the sea shone like burnished silver, undisturbed by a ripple.

So they waited and watched till, nothing happening, immediate terrors subsided. The end was a little nearer, that was all. The Enlighteners had promised themselves so often to be brave. It was only in the suddenness of peril that they forgot.

At one o'clock another meal came round, no longer a melancholy picnic buoyed up with fluttering efforts at cheerfulness; but a squalid wrestling with tinned foods and biscuit, for the gallant spirit had now died within them, as a weak bird dies in a cage, its last faint twitterings uttered. Never had the tremendous contrasts made themselves more brutally felt. They could read their danger in the faces of the men.

Only Mrs. Chesterfield had power to be pathetic, but she was writing a book, and, as she said, the artist came to the top in spite of herself.

"It seems now," her notes said, "that even our heroism is destined to be unrecorded, and that the ill-fated *Dawn* will leave no memory behind her."

"This," she wrote in a paragraph headed 'Last Moments,' "may be our last meal. And what a meal! Seven pale-faced women munching biscuits, not because they can eat but to keep up the routine established by Captain Norbert, who rules us with a gentle discipline. 'If we must go down,' he says, 'let us go down like brave men and women.' The appeal has not been lost on us, thank God! nor wasted on the crew. He it is who has kept us from despair, and the men from drink, and who never abandons hope. Poor Emilia Arden, till now the bravest, can scarcely bear the strain. Then there are our sick, poor things!" Here an account was given of their sufferings and of what was done to alleviate them, followed by "N.B." and the words, "This to precede 'Last Moments.'"

Further back in her notes she breaks out into meditation. "Strange," she exclaims, "how occupation dulls the edge of fear! Even in these probably wasted and useless notes of our great and, I hope, unmerited trial, the very fact that I am its humble historian comforts my poor aching heart. The same, I doubt not, holds good with the men now busied with a raft—which if the yacht founders, will be flung into the sea as our final refuge."

Elsewhere she wrote, "We set out to seek treasure ;

who knows whether in this dread experience we may not have found it. God grant we may!"

There was one point on which they were never tired of talking, and that was their hatred of Marcus Hart for having inveigled them into these dangers. Once, in a burst of self-investigation, Mrs. Kington asked, "How far was it our fault?"

"We're women," replied Mrs. Mundsley peevishly, "and how can we be expected to guess?"

"You should hear what the crew think!" said Mrs. Upperton. "They say he left the other boats behind on purpose!"

But these moments of self-searching were only possible when the glittering peace of the sea and the brazen quiet of the sky diminished the oppression of their fears by a half-promise of temporary security. When every hour brought, or seemed to bring, the deck nearer the hull's dark shadow cast on the sleeping sea, tearless resignation alone seemed fitting.

But another night came, the great calm still breathed softly around them, the moon rose again a larger crescent above the unbroken horizon, once more they lay down and tried to sleep, whilst the water lapped beneath them, and their sick murmured. To the question, "How many more hours can we float?" there was no answer.

Yet a ray of comfort reached them. Lady Horham, who was the least superstitious, awoke them with a little cry. She had dreamt, she said, that they were rescued by a great steamer. It came to them out of a flaming sunset, and as it approached she heard sounds of lovely music on board. Just as they were lowering a boat she woke with a start. Was that all? they asked eagerly. Yes, all except the feeling of certainty left in her that they would be saved! Besides, wasn't it clear to them now that, having kept afloat so long, their chances of rescue had increased? She had heard Mackinnon, a shrewd old Scot, tell Mr. Bates that by all the "laws of averages"—that was the phrase he used—it had. Evidently this had encouraged the dream.

Emilia got up to join Norbert on deck to tell him of her dream; when she stole gently back to the deck-house just before dawn, the others slept, their hopes raised, their fears soothed by Lady Horham's dream and the engineer's "laws of average."

CHAPTER XXVI

BUT although what Mrs. Kington, as a dream interpreter, called the hand of Providence, had raised their spirits when they were at a low ebb, the state of the wreck, now a dead thing on the sea, once more shattered their hopes. There was no sign of a ship, nor of any life on the sea, for the gulls had now left them to the shining solitudes and vast ocean silences.

"A few hundred gallons more and we're done for!" muttered Bates to Mackinnon, gazing at their decreasing shadow on the sea.

"I'll no trust your figures, mon," said the engineer, "an' ye needna trouble the leddies wi' yer fullish areethmotic!"

But the ladies, seeing the water stealthily creeping up the steps of the stairways leading below, needed no other warning.

"It's death approaching!" thought Mrs. Kington, with white lips.

Provisions were now tied to the raft, and the clumsy structure hoisted overboard and attached by ropes to the wreck.

Looked down upon from the deck, how contemptible a refuge it seemed! Mrs. Chesterfield, remembering the picture of the "Wreck of the *Medusa*" in the Louvre, felt her heart sink. It reminded her, she said, of that terrible tragedy! But as the other ladies had never heard of it, and she had forgotten the details of the story, their imaginations were spared the import of this sinister memory.

All the men, Norbert included, were working furiously in the blazing sun, tearing fragments from the yacht to strengthen the raft.

Whether it would be safe to sleep on board that night was now uncertain. Fortunately the barometer was still high. The calm was lasting.

At mid-day the sun beat down on the sea in waves of heavy heat. The canvas screen protecting the sick was removed to give them air, the sail above their heads moistened constantly with salt water; but little could be done to alleviate their feverish sufferings; the women watched them in dumb pity. Everything to be said had been said; in the sultry stupor of the day words and phrases—echoes of the words and phrases common to their set—of which in ordinary moments they made such voluble use, seemed aimless and almost meaningless. A new and simpler language was needed to express the tremendous change. They had lived on the polished surface of sterile feeling, their lives were now in the depths of speechless tragedy. Wrapping after wrapping, concealing them from themselves and each other, had been torn off. The prettiest poses once accepted as natural, the sweetest and falsest phrases, had been swept off as a rough hand brushes the down from the wings of a struggling butterfly.

From the deck-house, in the shade where they were now gathered together, through the torn planks they watched the men busy with saws and hammers. There was some comfort in this. It showed at least that all hope was not abandoned.

Every few minutes Norbert came to them and, looking through a smashed port, made a cheerful effort to encourage them. Soon another raft would be floated. They had drifted, and were still steadily drifting, southwards; Bates and Mackinnon believed into the course of ships trading with West African ports. Every hour their chance of rescue grew greater! But they had heard this before and knew its purpose.

"Dear Captain Norbert!" murmured Lady Horham, "what a blessing he is!"

"And I used to think he was a cynic," said Mrs. Tracy, half to herself. Then recalling Mr. Tracy's

opinion, who had described Norbert as "not half a bad sort of fellow, although a bit spoilt by the women," she added, "Poor dear Billy had the greatest respect for him."

"Say 'has,' it isn't so bad as 'had,'" said Mrs. Mundsley petulantly.

"How he loathed Marcus!" observed Mrs. Kington, thinking aloud.

"We agreed not to talk of ugly things," Mrs. Chesterfield interposed.

"I've been trying to fill my mind with nice thoughts, but can't," replied Mrs. Kington simply. "I can only think what brutes some men are, what a fool I've been, and how different I'll be if—I——"

Her voice broke. No one spoke, fearful lest they should turn the last screw. They could all weep silently except Mrs. Kington and Mrs. Tracy, who both became hysterical if permitted to dwell on their feelings aloud.

"Of course we all feel that," Mrs. Chesterfield observed, when it seemed safe to speak.

Then, through the broken sides of the deck-house, they saw Emilia, whose turn it was to look after their sick, crossing the deck from the canvas covering near the funnel to speak to Norbert. In her hands were a bottle of soda-water and some preparation of meat juice.

"Poor Emilia!" murmured Mrs. Tracy.

"Why 'poor'?" asked Mrs. Upperton. "She's the bravest of us all. She has only broken down once."

"She's broken-hearted because she made Captain Norbert come," said Mrs. Tracy, with reproach in her voice. "At first when he made her believe we should get out of it she was quite happy. It brought them together, and that's what she wanted. But now when——"

"Please don't, Nellie!" exclaimed Mrs. Kington; "we quite understand."

"Did Emilia tell you that?" Mrs. Upperton asked, ashamed to find her curiosity still active.

"No. But we were at school together, and I guess what she feels. Emilia was always in love with him."

"Yes, poor thing!" Mrs. Kington assented, remembering the journey in Marcus's motor through the May woods. She saw the gorse in flower, the blue-bells in the woods, heard the birds singing, and recalled the attitude she had struck as she had stood by the window smoking a cigarette whilst Norbert and Emilia returned together, like lovers, across the garden scented with wallflower and drowsy with murmuring bees. How good and peaceful and lovely it had all been! Fancy ever having been bored in so heavenly a place! How hideous, cruel and relentless the sea! How generous and kind and motherly the land!

The procession of thoughts hurrying across her mind, dragged a deep sigh up from her breast.

"Gertie!" exclaimed Mrs. Mundsley warningly, "Gertie!"

"I was so sorry for Emilia," replied the other, mistaking the selfish nature of the emotion.

"Let us be just," said Mrs. Upperton with some vigour, whose repentance had taken that direction. "No one is sorrier for Emilia Arden than myself, but I can't help saying it is partly her fault. If she hadn't engaged, or half-engaged, herself to Marcus Hart we shouldn't be here now!"

"What a wild thing to say!" exclaimed Mrs. Chesterfield, startled by the suggestion, but seeing truth in it.

"Wild or not, if you think you'll see I'm right."

They thought over it.

"Marcus was very jealous," assented Mrs. Chesterfield.

Then, remembering with a feeling of shame what mean things she had done to propitiate him, she shuddered inwardly.

"I suspect he only got them on board to study Emilia and Captain Norbert together," said Mrs. Kington. "There were hints, you know."

"Is that the explanation of the Treasure Hunter?" asked Lady Horham incredulously. Then solemnly she added, "Are we not doing what we determined not to do—talking scandal? This isn't the club!"

"Let us for once," said Mrs. Mundsley tremulously, "tell nothing but the real truth to each other. If ever there was a time for it, this is, but we still hide things from each other. You must all have felt it. Before I married—Nellie and I were married in the same month——"

"Not much more than a year ago," pleaded Mrs. Tracy mournfully.

"Not much," her schoolfellow assented. "Well before I married I was religious. Reggie wasn't, dear fellow, and—I suppose I'm very weak—for I followed where he went and became a sort of agnostic."

"Only quite a mild one, Helena!" said Mrs. Tracy soothingly, "and never quite that at heart. Father Blake told me so!"

"But he—Reggie, I mean—hated High Church," resumed Mrs. Mundsley, "and so I drifted away from what, before I became worldly and understood things had helped me. Once I used to confess to Father Blake, and I found it—such a comfort!"

"What! confess everything you did?" asked Mrs. Upperton aghast. "Quite everything?"

"Well—all one could decently. There are—details one can't quite, you know, but in a general way. And I've been thinking that if, as we crouch here waiting for—something to happen, we were to tell how wicked, selfish and mean we have been, ever since that man bribed himself into the club—for he did bribe himself in!—it might make it easier for us. It would for me, I know."

"I wasn't on the committee then, and I wish I never had been elected!" said Mrs. Upperton.

"You were spared that," said Lady Horham with restrained asperity, remembering the lunch and the diamond owl.

"It's an awful thing to confess," said Mrs. Mundsley,

"but my mind will be easier if I tell you how dreadfully I hated Marcus, and what mean things I did to keep in with him. I never told Reggie, who calls him 'poisonous.' I really made Marcus bring me on this trip! If he didn't take me, I said, I should be wretched! I can see his horrible eye glow now! and hear his croaking voice. 'My dear girl, of course you shall come,' he said. 'Treasure to treasure! What? But I shall expect you to be nice to me, you know!' Then I actually gave—well—the sort of laugh he expected me to give. How I hate myself for it, although I don't remember being ashamed at the time. The brute went on to say that we needn't tell Emilia and to pretend the usual sort of horrors, and because I meant to get an invitation—I—I—— Oh, I never can forgive myself."

"Don't, Helena!" cried Mrs. Tracy. "We're all as bad."

"Emilia will hear you," said Mrs. Chesterfield.

"I told her," resumed Mrs. Mundsley, recovering her self-control with an effort, "but isn't there something hopelessly bad in a woman who can toady such a man just to be in the swim?—and such a swim!"

"My dear Helena!" said Mrs. Kington, "you were only leading the sort of life you were compelled to lead if you wanted—well—the sort of thing we all do—I mean did—want. Marcus is what Bobby calls an asset we couldn't afford to waste. We meant to exploit him, but he exploited us! He had an odious manner of pretending he could do so much for one. He made ever so many thousand pounds for Mrs. Arden—that's how the entanglement with Emilia began. When I think what some women in London were ready to do for the man I can see no reason why you should worry yourself because you laughed in the way he expected you to laugh!"

"It all shows how much worse I am than any of you!" broke in Mrs. Chesterfield, who had been listening with a gaunt face. "I can't tell you how I hate that man. He has made a toot of me. We

owe him money. The General got into difficulties. I entreated Marcus to help us out. Ever since he has had his pound of flesh. He questioned me about Emilia, set me to spy on her, and then accused me of not 'running straight' when he thought I gave her hints! Then he used me as a go-between with the duchess. Oh, I can't tell you through what humiliations he hasn't dragged me. I daren't tell the General, although I did it for his sake. I've flattered, cajoled and toadied him, and whatever happens—except that we wanted money so desperately—I shall get all I deserve!"

And then for the first time she burst into tears, whilst Mrs. Mundsley and Mrs. Tracy, swept away by her example, wept too.

In the midst of it Emilia returned.

"Emilia," exclaimed Lady Horham, "we have been confessing the meanest thing we ever did in our lives, to ease our consciences."

"That's why some of us are crying," said Mrs. Upperton.

"We have been brought together in happiness when we were not always just to each other," continued Lady Horham, "but now we're flung together in misery we are telling one another how mean we have been."

"We're nothing if not original," murmured Mrs. Kington, half to herself, glancing with a pitiful, unhappy smile at the weeping women.

"It's about Marcus," explained Mrs. Tracy tearfully, "and our sickening love of wealth, as Billy calls it, even when it isn't our own."

"Then what have you said about me?" Emilia asked, standing at the doorway.

"It has been a sort of general confession," observed Mrs. Upperton apologetically.

There was a brief silence, which Lady Horham broke.

"Emilia," she said, "ought to know what you think of her."

"You won't think me a beast?" Mrs. Upperton pleaded. "I know it wasn't your fault—nothing one does is quite one's fault when we see things as we do now."

"Broadly?" suggested Mrs. Kington, with an attempt at bravado.

"Gertie!" said Lady Horham warningly.

"But I did say—and I still think it, Emilia," resumed Mrs. Upperton—"that, if it hadn't been for you none of us would be here. I cannot help feeling we're all victims of some scheme of Marcus'."

"You can't say anything too bad about me," replied Emilia. "For I was in earnest. I meant Marcus to marry me, because I felt I couldn't live without money and I wanted his! I never confessed this even to myself, but that's what it all meant. Then I found I loathed him. After that it grew into a sort of hideous game of make-believe between us. We were really fighting under the surface. He had a hold on me through my promises, the duchess's support, and my mother's approval of the engagement. He was determined I shouldn't break away so I made him as jealous as I could—you've all seen how. I was about to be honest—to tell him it was impossible for me to marry him and that I cared for Arthur Norbert—I even intended to admit that I had behaved abominably, and ask him to forgive me, when this happened. Now you know the sort of woman I am—just an adventuress, compelled to fight to keep her greedy place in the world."

The voice of comfort came from Mrs. Chesterfield.

"Emilia, dear," she said in a broken voice, "we know. You were driven to it by—by what we all wanted. But you really do care for some one, and that has saved you."

"Yes! That makes it worse. I dragged him here too! I'm just a mass of selfishness. I only thought of what I wanted myself—clothes, amusement, excitement, admiration—everything I could grab."

"But we all urged you to marry Marcus—the

duchess, your mother, and everybody," said Mrs. Kington plaintively.

"You're not really to blame," urged Lady Horham, aching to be generous, "it's what Captain Norbert calls 'the laws we've made for ourselves'!"

"The System!" said Mrs. Upperton, "and an inexpressibly vile one it is—seen from this wreck."

But Emilia was bent on flogging herself.

"No, no," she said. "The duchess and my mother really didn't influence me. I pretended they did as an excuse to myself. I was a hypocrite to whom not to be rich seemed the worst thing in the world. And now I'm face to face with this!"

She glanced out at the sea and sky ablaze with pitiless sunlight, desolate with remorseless vacancy.

There was a silence. Mrs. Chesterfield sighed. It was the first time she had wept for years. She caught herself now watching what was stirring within her as though she were a personality outside her mind.

"Are we to blame?" she asked suddenly, dizzy with weariness and scarcely conscious that she spoke.

"No, it's the fault of men like Marcus," replied Mrs. Upperton. "We babble and swagger and boast about our influence, but we've no power. It's the men with money—heaps of money—who set the pace. You remember Captain Norbert's joke about Marcus being the Black Man at the Gate with the drawn sword? It's a true picture! I hope, he'll be left on his awful island—to starve! Nothing's bad enough for him! Emilia treated him a thousand times better than he deserved."

"Polly, Polly!" exclaimed Lady Horham reproachfully, "is that the right spirit?"

"We said we would speak nothing but the truth. Well, if I'm—I'm—to be drowned to-night, I shall go down hating Marcus for it!"

"We ought to try to forgive even Marcus at such a moment," said Mrs. Tracy, tremulously comforted by tears, and determined to be "very good."

But a different spirit filled Emilia as she stood in

the low doorway, a frame of fierce light vibrating behind her pale hollowing cheeks and bright brown hair. As no help came and chances of rescue decreased, her hopes, at first buoyed up by love and relief at her escape from Marcus Hart, had vanished. Her grief was that her decision had been made too late. But fatigue, trouble and doubt had not yet subdued her, and, for the moment, resentment against what seemed the cruelty of destiny was uppermost in her mind. "Cowards die twice," Norbert had just told her. Then Henley's spirited lines stirred in her memory and she quoted—

"Out of the dark that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods there be
For my unconquerable soul!"

and startled Lady Horham.

"Emilia," she said, "that's heathenish."

"I don't care," she answered; "he," and she glanced back to the deck at Norbert, "he told me them to comfort me."

"But then he's a soldier," whimpered Mrs. Tracy. "The lines only apply to a man. I'm not 'the Captain of my soul.' I never have been, and never shall be. Oh, I wish Billy were here!"

"Nellie Tracy!" said Lady Horham, as sternly as she could, "that's a very selfish and wicked wish!"

"It's the sort of wish natural to us," said Emilia. "We can't change our spots because we happen to be frightened. I believe I'm trying to do what people call 'repent,' but it's only an inverted sort of rage."

"Because it's that brute Marcus's fault, and you know it is, Emilia!" Mrs. Upperton broke in again, resuming the thread of her thoughts.

This roused the smouldering spite in Mrs. Chesterfield. Turning her haggard face to Emilia she said: "He boasted to me he would 'take it out of you some day,' and I had to listen like the mean wretch I was."

"Well, he has 'taken it out of me,' as he called it,"

Emilia answered bitterly. "It was always a base sort of fight between us. We were worthy of each other!"

"But tell us, Emilia," said Mrs. Upperton. "I can't help wanting things to be clear even now. Didn't you make Captain Norbert come with us because you were frightened to be left alone with Marcus?"

"I don't think that a fair question," said Lady Horham, mechanically assuming her presidential manner.

"This isn't a debate at the Enlighteners," retorted Mrs. Upperton; "we're just trying to get at things. We've thrown over flattery and cajolery for good!"

"To free our minds of what we're ashamed of!" murmured Mrs. Kington.

"Tell us, Emilia!" urged Mrs. Mundsley.

"Isn't it true you did?" continued Mrs. Upperton.

"Nearly true," she answered. "There were meaner reasons too. The motives of selfish women are generally 'mixed with cunning sparks from hell'!"

But Emilia's outburst made Mrs. Tracy, for the moment, forget her own sorrows. "Emilia," she sobbed, "come here, dearest. I want you near me. You've been very good to me and very brave! I won't believe what you say. It's because you're broken and tired, and because he's here. At first I envied you, and it kept you up, but now it makes it worse. I thank God Billy's not here really, although I keep on wanting him. But don't be reckless and hard! Come to me! It isn't your fault; it's nobody's. It's fate!"

"It's Marcus," muttered Mrs. Upperton.

Then Emilia, dry-eyed, pale, remorseful, went to her schoolfellow, and for a while each shut out the daylight on the other's shoulder.

"Poor old girl! I am sorry for you," whispered Emilia.

"Not sorrier than I am for you, darling!" her friend replied.

Then they comforted each other silently till Norbert appeared at the doorway.

He looked at them, heavy at heart, with the message he brought; they were so weary, changed, so helplessly beaten and broken—neering, it seemed, the abyss of silent suffering into which sick children and the dumb creatures which live with men sink before they die.

But, as Emilia's eyes met his, he decided she should tell them. His glance beckoned her, and they went together out on the deck.

It was mid-day; the heat intense. So still was the sea and cloudless the sky that the sun beat down on a shadowless desert of flashing waters without a purple reflection or an azure gleam to soften the threat of the ocean wastes. The quiet circle of burning calm seemed the lifeless and sailless warning of their fate.

"We're sinking slowly," he said. "In six hours we must leave the yacht and take to the rafts. It won't be safe to pass another night on board. But we have still a chance, if the calm continues."

She heard quietly, merely asking what he wished her to do.

"Tell them," he replied, glancing back at the deck-house.

She hesitated a moment, and then said, "You do forgive me?"

He had "forgiven her" a dozen times, but still she wanted the assurance repeated.

"There's nothing to forgive. I would rather be here with you than anywhere. Remember, we're not beaten yet. Go," he said, "and tell them so."

Then, returning to the deck-house, Emilia delivered the message quite calmly, repeating Norbert's words, "Remember, we're not beaten yet."

"Only because we're still alive," muttered some one.

Blank despair now stole over them. They had "repented" and confessed, but still there were profounder depths to be traversed. Leaving the deck-

house, a dejected and stricken group, like the wraiths of themselves, they looked down despairingly again on the frail rafts, where the men, with a few spars and some canvas, were rigging a protection for the sick. To try to live on the rickety floating platform seemed to them all a wasted effort in a useless struggle. There was not one of the seven women who would not have preferred euthanasia to the horrors pictured by their nervous imaginations.

"If I could be put quietly out of my misery," thought Mrs. Kington, her thoughts fixed on the little bottles in her dressing-case. She glanced away at the blue-vaulted sea-spaces shining about her; their radiance seemed the shadow of approaching death.

To shut it out she knelt on the deck, burying her face in her hands, already burnt, parched, and coarsened by sun and sea, till an exclamation from Emilia, standing near, roused her.

"Look," she said, "how tame it is."

Then, as she raised her head, Mrs. Kington beheld one of the beautiful sea-birds, with dove-coloured back and black-edged wings. As it wheeled over the deck and glanced down, she saw the glitter of its inquiring eye.

"The gulls have come back at last," said Emilia.

Then she remembered the mystic bird that

"Every day, for food or play,
Came to the mariners' hollo!"

This memory appeared an ominous link connecting the intolerable past with the careless indolence of the schoolroom. Had she learnt the poem then to serve as a warning now? A meaning, as in a dream, seemed struggling through the mists to reach her dulled perceptions. It seemed to her that the bird was trying to break the spell of cruelty that ruled the empty spaces its arrowy flight defied.

Mrs. Tracy and Mrs. Kington agreed, that it was "a good omen."

Other birds followed, till the waft of wings and the

thrill of petulant cries recalled days when they had seemed as secure against sea-dangers as the gulls which had followed the splendid yacht. But now the yacht was a soddened wreck and they helpless victims.

When they were throwing food to the gulls a dark shadow touched the rim of the western horizon, approaching and widening as it moved across the shining spaces of the oily calm. Then they saw the steely glitter change to shades of purple and azure wherever the breeze roused the stagnant sea to colour and life.

Then a sailor, perched in the torn rigging, muttered something excitedly to a man below. The other joined him. Some one cried, "A sail!" Hope fluttered tremulously in their hearts.

A rocket shot up and burnt with a pale flash in the radiant air. They had made so many appeals in vain to the night; now they were crying for aid to the dazzling daylight skies.

Petard after petard was exploded; but, although the gulls fled in terror, at last, behind the purple shadow, those who stood on deck saw the gleam of a sail.

Slowly it grew, till the hull of a two-masted schooner became visible. Slowly it approached, the breeze preceding it, till the sea broke into ripples that lapped the sullen sides of the steadily sinking yacht.

"What was she?" a voice asked, alive with hope.

A fruit-ship trading between Plymouth and the Azores, Bates believed.

Suspense changing to relief, sea, sky and circling horizon had ceased to be silent Halls of Death, for out of them help was coming.

The schooner drew nearer and nearer; two boats were lowered and pulled across to the wreck; the men on the yacht raised a cheer, the women who had wept in despair now wept for joy.

After sunset, from the schooner's narrow and encumbered decks the Eight Guests saw the lights

left burning on the yacht suddenly disappear as the waves leapt over her decks and she went down to the sea.

But the breeze which sent the water-logged *Dawn* to the bottom bore the calm-baffled schooner ten days later to Las Palmas, whence the message announcing the rescue of his guests and the fate of his yacht reached Marcus Hart.

CHAPTER XXVII

HAD Marcus Hart, his guests and his yacht offended the deities to whom the imagination of the ancients entrusted the empire of the seas, the punishment allotted could scarcely have been inflicted with greater nicety. In it was manifested that half-malevolent irony attributed by the poets to these vanished instruments of destiny. Though Marcus was spared prolonged discomfort on the rainless, sun-baked island which concealed his imaginary treasure—and there was nothing he dreaded more than serious personal inconvenience—even his robust faith in his luck was shaken by the miscarriage of his experiment.

From the story of his escape the most ingenious reporters could draw few thrilling pictures. The day after the yacht steamed away into the storm the weather moderated; one of the damaged boats was repaired; a safer beach for launching her discovered, and a crew dispatched on a brief cruise to the southwest, where, as the skipper anticipated, they met the s.s. *Obi*, homeward bound from the West African ports. *The Obi* was owned by the company which West had formerly served, and he found little difficulty in persuading her skipper, whom he knew, that a promising opportunity of salvage was offered. "You don't," said West to his former colleague, "have the chance of rescuing a bald-headed millionaire more than once in a lifetime!" The other concurred, and Marcus, to save his face, having just relinquished the perfunctory search for "treasure," was greatly relieved when *The Obi's* siren startled the sea-fowl.

Still Marcus went on board with misgivings. To carry out his experiment on his friends, it had been

necessary to admit West to his confidence. "brute," he argued, was thus afforded an opportunity of bleeding him, which Marcus's own experience of life suggested was unlikely to be wasted. His manner, therefore, to both skippers became as genial and propitiatory as he could make it. He apologized to West for the ill-temper he had shown—attributing it generously to his extreme solicitude for his yacht and his guests.

The skipper of *The Obi* was amenable but with an eye to business. Although his ship was both overdue and short of coal, he consented to make a twelve hours' search for *The Dawn*. As this proved fruitless, both skippers persuaded themselves and Hart that she must have reached Teneriffe, Las Palmas or possibly Madeira. At Las Palmas *The Obi* was to coal. She bustled there (full steam at Hart's expense) only to discover that nothing had been heard of the yacht. Nor did a free use of the cable diminish Hart's growing anxiety. *The Dawn* had cost him, as he said, "a pot of money." What was to be done? Probably she had returned to San Pedro after they left. Finally, having chartered a sturdy steam tug, West and the crew of *The Dawn* were dispatched to look for the yacht, whilst Marcus Hart returned to England on *The Obi*, and arriving in Plymouth a week later, found himself the centre of the sensation which the cable from Las Palmas had already created. A telegram from Teneriffe, handed to him the moment he landed, informed him there was no news of his yacht or those on board.

"My God!" muttered Hart.

For once the astute man feared that he had given himself "a devilish bad advertisement!" This apprehension the newspapers, full of sensational rumours, or romantic conjecture (written by "experts") concerning "The Fate of *The Dawn*," seriously increased.

A journal of weight and repute, defying the risks of libel, went so far as to point out, the day after he

landed, that it was not customary for the leader of an expedition to hurry home, announce his own failure, and leave his comrades in the lurch; and, although he set to work to make the best of the situation by lavishly distributing to the reporters the most sanguine probabilities, pointing out the unlikelihood of any serious accident to so splendidly equipped a yacht as *The Dawn*, Marcus already regretted that he had been "so eager," as the same critic put it, "to get back to the flesh-pots."

Thus for once in his life Mr. Hart was afraid to face the creditors of his reputation.

The moment he arrived in London, the duchess in great alarm met for him. A distinguished yachtsman had assured her that no man with the faintest inkling of seamanship would have run the risks into which Marcus seemed to have rushed with a light heart. "If," said this distinguished sailor, "he meant to run his friends into all the worst danger he could find, he couldn't have done better." The same critic further added that he wouldn't trust a sack of potatoes to such keeping—let alone seven of the most charming women in London. Wherever he looked Marcus was met by this view of his conduct. After having attacked him with it, the duchess recalled her misgivings. From the outset, she had been opposed to the expedition—not, perhaps, quite consciously, but still at the bottom of her mind. It was all very well to say, as her friends were saying, that she ought to have prevented the members of the Enlighteners from going! Whatever she had said, they would have gone all the same. They were so keen about it! That unpleasant greed for notoriety which she believed the newspapers called "the smart spirit" was much too rampant among them to be checked by her!

To all this, and much more, Marcus respectfully listened. The truth was that her grace's conscience smote her; her cousin, Mrs. Arden, was "almost frantic," and she sent for Marcus Hart in the hopes of hearing something to allay her relative's anxieties.

Marcus replied with all the tragic resignation he could assume. What were her grace's anxieties, what were Mrs. Arden's compared to his? Was not all he loved on board the yacht? Rash and careless? He had one of the best skippers, and had never acted without his advice. The landing might have been a mistake—the reporters said it was—but the risks certainly never presented themselves to any one on board. Whatever happened, Marcus would a thousand times sooner now be on board his yacht with his friends than facing this undeserved obloquy in England. Sneer? Any one could sneer! *The Torch* had described him as a man who set out to find a treasure and lost a dozen in the attempt! The greatest treasure he had lost was his own peace of mind. Miserable and heartbroken as he was, he was still very far from abandoning hope. That his guests would be rescued he entertained not the slightest doubt, but for the agony of mind which he had endured ever since *The Dawn* disappeared round the point of that ill-fated island, nothing but the joy of seeing Emilia Arden again could ever compensate him.

Thus, as pathetically as he could, Marcus spread himself out before the now implacable duchess.

If Mr. Hart was capable of blundering, or of tempting others to blunder, as every seafaring authority declared was the case, he was apparently equally incapable of taking adequate means to repair the disaster. Stupidity, in the duchess's opinion, was worse even than meanness!

"Why, what d'you expect me to do?" gasped Hart.

"Do?" retorted the duchess. "Do everything. I would rather spend every penny I possessed than remain an hour in doubt about those dear unlucky people. I would charter every steamer in the seven seas and search for the yacht till I found her. Instead of that you hire one beggarly tug!"

Marcus was staggered. Under the injustice of the

insinuation his wrath stirred. In the heat of the moment he almost mentioned the sums he had spent and was still spending; fortunately the unseemliness of the retort occurred in time, and he contented himself with remarking that the character of her Grace's own grief added her to the fact that he was by far the greatest sufferer.

"You the greatest sufferer!" the indignant duchess exclaimed. "Why, you are as sound and as sleek as ever. There's my unhappy cousin breaking her heart, and crying all night and day because she was wicked enough—she calls it 'wicked'—to let Emilia go on this infernal cruise. Her sole comfort is that we made you the Captain Norbert! Go to her, and comfort her as you can, but don't, for Heaven's sake, tell me again that you're the greatest sufferer! If you do I feel I shall scream!"

Perceiving the nervous pitch to which the duchess had been wrought, partly by her natural regrets, but not a little by the responsibility attributed to her by certain paragraph writers, Marcus made another effort to calm her apprehensions and, as he had often done in business, boldly bluffed. Her grace might be perfectly sure that he should never have come home unless fully persuaded that their friends were safe!

The solemnity of his manner and the weight of his assurance were not without effect.

"Then for goodness' sake," said the duchess, "go and tell my unhappy cousin so at once."

Marcus obeyed. It was a relief to escape the duchess's accusing eye, even if a worse interview awaited him with Emilia's mother. To defer this, he decided to walk—walking (of which he did very little), he believed sometimes helped him to think. So he gave orders to his *chauffeur*, and rolled off in the direction of Sloane Street by way of Piccadilly. If Marcus had no "settled beliefs," as they are called, he was not without certain superstitions. Things, as he sometimes expressed it, rose in his mind and

buzzed in his brain. It was this simple phenomenon that had tempted him to bluff. It was his conviction that his yacht was not lost (probably because it was his), and when he had insisted on it to pacify the duchess he was merely following what some observers called instinct, and others, "backing his own opinion." Still, what the irrational side of his nature offered him for comfort, the other side accepted with mistrustful acquiescence. "It means," said Marcus, "that I won't believe in the worst till I know it has happened." It really meant that he was trusting "to luck" and his own cunning, and that, on the whole, experience had taught him such confidence was justifiable.

But the day was hot, the pavement scorched his feet, Marcus's legs were short and his body heavy. As he rolled along he breathed heavily. By the time he had reached the Piccadilly end of Park Lane he repented having sent away his tandalette. He was irritably glancing about him for a hansom when his eye was caught by the poster of an evening paper displayed at Hyde Park Corner. "*Dawn* founders! Rescue of all on board!"

For the moment he gasped. A loafer near him hoped he was going to have a fit. Then, recovering himself, he hurried for the paper.

"Yes, sir!" said the newsboy. "Yacht gone down like a thousand o' bricks, but all the beautiful ladies saved. I'm sold out. Quite a 'winner' run on us."

Marcus growled ferociously at the malicious urchin, and hurried on till he got a paper; then, amid the roar of the traffic, under the luminous dust that gives London its strange and exciting mid-summer glamour, he read the brief message.

The schooner *Vixen*, bound from the Azores to Plymouth, had rescued all on board *The Dawn* and conveyed them to Madeira. Captain Norbert and the ladies, who were in excellent health, were returning by first steamer, but a stewardess and two of the crew had been left in hospital.

The news caused Marcus two separate shocks, one of relief, the other of resentment.

After a little reflection, however, the one merged in the other and he felt that he had been badly treated. The loss of his yacht seemed an undeserved piece of ill-luck and he nursed an angry grudge against "the clumsy beggars who ought to have saved her." Very little thought, moreover, was necessary to make him see that the return of his Eight Guests, with Norbert at their head and the hero of the adventure, might be anything but a reason for unmixed joy for himself. In planning their "moral lesson" he had given too many hostages to fortune and incurred unforeseen risks. For the moment, however, in spite of the loss of his yacht, the sense of relief was predominant. He could at least confront Mrs. Arden! Taking the first cab on the stand, he drove to the flat in Sloane Street, framing a protective policy as he went.

Only two people in the world suspected the secret of this much-advertised, but now sternly condemned Treasure Hunt—his skipper West and his friend Altenstein. Both must be managed.

When Mr. Hart saw Mrs. Arden he nearly rushed into her arms.

"Our dear one," he cried, "is saved!"

Then before she could speak of her anxieties he described his own. Remembering a phrase, of which the exaggeration had pleased him, he told her how he had been "his own soul in hell." "Don't, dear lady," he pleaded, "don't tell me what you have gone through. Can't I measure your anguish of doubt and anxiety by my own? If the worst had happened I—I—well, I should have—refused to go on living! My soul has been in the depths. But why speak of it? Thank God, all danger is over now, and that I am the worst sufferer!"

He was telling the story of his adventures, boasting of the extraordinary precautions taken to ensure the comfort and safety of his guests at the expense of his own, when a cablegram from Emilia was brought

to Mrs. Arden, who, having read it, handed it to Marcus. "Safe and well," it said. "Return with Arthur to-morrow on *Tarquah*."

"How lucky Arthur Norbert was with them," said Mrs. Arden innocently. "I can't be too grateful."

"Lucky for him? Yes," Marcus replied. "How often have I wished myself in his place and you in mine! But never mind, dear lady. Emilia will be restored to us, and you and I will leave nothing undone to make up to her for what she has gone through. I hope—I most devoutly hope—that before this season is over I may claim to be her prime comforter."

"Prime" even to Marcus seemed to lack a little out of place here, but the reference to Arthur drove him to assert himself. "Did not the memory of a shared sorrow," he asked sentimentally, "unite sympathies more closely than the remembrance of frivolous joys?"

When Marcus had a part to play he did his best to rise to it, and having, as it seemed to him, reached it now, he left Mrs. Arden and, hurrying to the Post Office, cable, to his skipper, awaiting instructions at Las Palmas, to return at once.

Marcus had a certain infected philosophy on which he drew in an emergency. It now admitted that "there was the devil to pay," and with Mr. Hart this was more than an empty phrase. Pay? Yes, he must pay. How he was not yet sure. He must wait till the others got back. One thing was plain to him—and the sting was here—the power of his wealth had never been more fruitlessly exercised.

It was—even without counting the loss of his yacht—the most expensive disappointment of his life.

Why the deuce couldn't he "leave well alone"? Curse Norbert, curse Altenstein, curse Low and his tricks—curse everybody! There didn't seem much room in this beastly world for a man with original ideas and the pluck to practise them. Well, he supposed no chap could always win, and this time he had been well licked.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE remnant of the crew and Marcus's shipwrecked guests met at Madeira a wandering journalist, himself in search of treasure in the shape of sensational copy for a breathless News Agency. This gentleman interviewed Bates and Mackinnon, was permitted to read Mrs. Chesterfield's notes, and to talk with the ladies generally. His imagination and memory were well paired. "Seven charming and highly-cultured ladies on whom it would be impertinent to bestow the epithet 'smart,' although they help to form that inner centre of wit and brightness which makes London Society the most picturesque and brilliant in the world," were suddenly discovered to be a dazzling group of Grace Darlings. Adulatory paragraphs became thick as autumn leaves.

There was no doubt of it: this time the "Seven" were "on the top"!

When he read the papers—especially the ha'penny ones, Marcus blinked.

What a chance he had given them—by mistake!

But this was not all. The ladies, with beautiful modesty, all agreed that the real hero was Captain Norbert. He it was who had kept up their courage and that of the crew by "his splendid and unselfish conduct." "With such a man at our elbow," Mrs. Chesterfield declared, "how could we despair?" "Had Captain Norbert been leader of the expedition," said Mrs. Kington, "*The Dawn* would never have been lost."

Except Miss Arden (who was under Norbert's orders) all the ladies fell willing victims to the Madeira reporter. It was such a relief to talk of

their past sufferings, and get the credit for them! But a level of dignity and magnanimity was maintained well worthy of the occasion. Lady Horham unselfishly recorded their profound relief to learn that their late host was "safe and well at England"! Reading between the lines of her letter you could see that the committee of the Enlighteners—although disappointed with the manner in which the expedition had been managed—forgave their leader for the dangers to which he had exposed them although Bates's gossip suggested "grave errors of judgment."

There were showers of glory and flattery for every one concerned in the "Treasure-Hunt" at Marcus. *The Trumpet* devoted an eloquent glowing article to the heroic conduct of "the Seven," as they were playfully called, pointing out how "they had faced death with a dignity, a fortitude, a gallant and tearless resignation never surpassed and rarely equalled by their sex; and yet these worthy daughters of an imperial race sprang from that much-abused clique known as 'heart society!'" "We may," said *The Trumpet*, "be a luxurious people and a luxury-loving people; we may hide our manhood or womanhood under the mask of flippancy or frivolity, but nothing can shake the unfaltering courage of our race."

And this was what Marcus had prepared! He had made Norbert a hero and "the Seven" dazzling heroines.

How Altenstein would laugh at him! This came of trying to help Providence teach a lot of useless, impudent people their right place in the world.

Luckily they wouldn't be back for another six days at least. There might be time for Mr. Hart to recapture some of the sympathy failure had cost him.

Why not summon a meeting of Enlighteners at his house "to give an account of his stewardship" before the committee had a chance of bragging of what they had gone through?

He went at once to consult the duchess, but was coldly received.

The duchess had the press-reputation of being the best-dressed woman in London. It is true that this distinction was also impartially allotted to other "social leaders," but she nevertheless thought it her duty to make some attempt to deserve it, "devoting," as her cousin Mrs. Arden said, "serious thought to her clothes." So grave, however, had been her apprehensions that she countermanded some orders given to her dressmaker, lest the threatened tragedy, accompanied by a rapid change in the fashions, might render certain garments useless. For the temporary confusion in her wardrobe resulting from this she now held Mr. Hart responsible.

But this was not her only grievance. Several Radical organs of opinion which publish long columns concerning the doings of women of fashion, had not hesitated to censure her patronage of the "abortive Treasure Search" as discreditable to her discernment. If Mr. Hart had brought back his treasure there might have been some excuse for his Grace's encouragement, but the famous "Quest" about which there had been so much fuss, had turned out a wild-goose chase, and no duchess in England—especially when the intelligence of the British aristocracy was subjected to the scrutiny of an enlightened democracy, as was the case to-day—could afford to be mixed up with wild-goose chases, however attractive or romantic. "From those who have the pretension to be our born leaders," said this moralist, "we have a right to expect at least common sense."

With these slights rankling in her mind the duchess was disinclined to help Mr. Hart. Nor did she conceal her feelings. It seemed to her, she said, rather a moment for sincere thanksgiving than premature excuses. Any meeting of the Enlighteners, either formal or informal, so long as the shipwrecked members were still at sea, was in the duchess's opinion unjustifiable. Mr. Hart would have an

opportunity of giving an account of his response after the committee had returned, and she trusted that it might re-establish his reputation as a practical man of affairs, which, she regretted to see, certain newspapers were now questioning.

"My dear duchess," retorted Marcus, unsundered by the snub, "the newspapers will say anything of us."

"I can only hope that neither of us deserves worse censure than we receive," returned the duchess.

Her manner compelled Marcus to shift his to one of simple resignation.

After this he departed with as much dignity as he could muster. The rest of the afternoon was devoted to calling on editors and newspaper proprietors (of whom he numbered several among his most useful supporters). As a result of these efforts the paragraphs about "Mr. Marcus Hart" became slightly less supercilious, and *The Trumpet* reported that there had been "some talk" of presenting Mr. Hart with a silver model of the ill-fated yacht *Dawn*, as evidence of the sympathy felt for him in "yachting circles," but unfortunately Mr. Hart had felt himself compelled to discourage the idea.

That evening the Baron Altenstein, who had heard the news of his friend's troubles at Vienna with feelings which it is no exaggeration to describe as "mixed," sent a telegram to say that he hoped to lunch with him to-morrow.

"Spare me your congratulations, my dear fellow," said Marcus when they met. "I've been looking forward to your sympathy, and I'll take it as—expressed."

Altenstein looked at him curiously with a malicious twinkle in his big Semitic eyes.

"You're thinner, Marcus," he said amiably.

Marcus observed that no man was likely to get fat on the husks of comfort being showered on him, let alone on shipwreck. But he was determined to keep his temper, and summoned his own peculiar philosophy to his aid. Perhaps he had been a bit spoilt! Every-

body's pride is humbled occasionally. It was a mere question of luck—how much you were kicked. Luck and pluck ruled the world. If one must be kicked, the best way was to get it over as soon as possible and forget all about it! To these heights his wisdom now.

"All right, Altenstein," he said. "I know I'm licked, but you needn't write it up red on the wall! I'm the what's-his-name—the engineer hoist by his own thing-a-my-bob! Don't mind telling me I've made a mess of it! Rub my nose in it. I saw the duchess yesterday. She did the job nicely. Suppose you try your hand. It's not quite such a light one as you think!"

Altenstein was greatly enjoying himself, although his grin was friendly.

"It's the quaintness of it, Marcus," he said.

"The sort o' thing people who don't quite know what they mean call 'nony,' eh?" growled the other. "I've enjoyed that myself—in my time."

"That's it. You've made them all heroes and heroines when you meant to chasten 'em! Chasten, I think, is the right word. No, old chap; it was something more than luck against you. Perhaps you played Low's experiment on too big a scale. Perhaps you played it clumsily. Well, I'm sorry! The moral aim was so noble. It's like flogging the master to improve the naughty boys! Tragic, I call it. I came back in a hurry to subscribe to that testimonial they're getting up for you!"

"Go on, Altenstein. The devil who stands at a chap's elbow and tempts him to make a fool of himself generally goes on as you do. I knew everything you'd say before you said it."

"Such tricks have great imaginations," replied Altenstein, under the impression that he was quoting Shakespeare. "But I've done. The exploit is in regions beyond laughter, Marcus! What mirth a friend's discomfiture afforded was exhausted before we met. I looked to extract amusement from your

experiment—but at the expense of your guests. They'll be home on Friday, the papers say. What a devil of a reception we'll give them! That send-off at Waterloo will be nothing to it. How is the duchess taking it?"

"Badly," said Marcus.

"And Mrs. Arden?"

"She's fairly reasonable now Emilia's safe."

"I suppose things will go on all the same with the girl," continued Altenstein gently. "It's quite a pretty comedy too, only to make it quite artistic (I mean, from your point of view, Marcus) you ought to have comforted the lady, not the other chap. The dramatic interest, the poetic justice, or whatever you choose to call it, has shifted a bit! However, no doubt your chance will turn up in the next act. Something else must be done for the hero in this case, Marcus, for I'm told the lady has no need of him."

Marcus's eyes blazed, his moustache and eyebrows almost met, but his will still controlled his rage and his voice.

"All right, Altenstein," he said, "all right! Rub it in with salt and turpentine. Perhaps you'd better run round to your clubs and tell 'em how your pal got put in the cart. It's a good story, and will make you popular."

Then Altenstein, who was never known to desert a friend who trusted him nor forgive one who didn't, ceased to jeer and became a shrewd adviser. The thing, he said, must be kept dark. West was the only weak spot.

"He won't get another job," said Altenstein, "so keep him on as your skipper; that will shut his mouth."

"Yes," said Marcus, "but on shore."

"Marcus," said Altenstein, after a short pause, "you must give 'em the biggest welcome you can, and, whatever it costs, see it's properly staged. This isn't the time for small economics."

"Trust me," said Marcus, "I'll see it's big. Flowers, refreshment, special trains—everything."

"Everything except a band," said Altenstein. "We'll think it out."

And they did. Two days later, when the s.s. *Tarq'ah*, bound for Liverpool, waited off Plymouth to land London passengers, a splendid new tug-boat, decked out with flags, crowded with brilliantly-dressed ladies all bearing bouquets, steamed up to the big mail boat in a brilliant flutter of welcome. On board the guests, tremulous with pride, joy, and excitement, recognized their friends.

"There's Billy," cried Mrs. Tracy, almost speechless with delight.

"Billy, whom she had never expected to see again, Billy in the neatest blue clothes and smartest of ties—with something of the glitter of the bridegroom about him still. And one by one, as the tug approached, the others recognized husbands, fathers, mothers, brothers—even poor relatives, in normal times kept at a distance. The tug was crowded with the Eight Guests' kith and kin.

Marcus, in fact, had collected every one they loved or ought to love. He had feasted them in the special train down, he had lavished his flowers on the ladies and the most expensive cigars and drinks on the men, not omitting the young gentlemen who carried note-books, said to be reporters.

"A magnificent beanfeast," said Norbert, looking down from the deck on the welter of waving hats, handkerchiefs, and bouquets, which gave life and colour to the puffing steam-tug. "Look at our Marcus!"

In front of the excited group of friends Mr. Hart stood prominently forth, clad in a suit of chaste grey and shining lacquered boots, recklessly waving a costly Panama hat. Beside him was Mrs. Arden in pale mauve muslin. Overhead was the blue summer sky and the warm afternoon sun. Those on the tug cheered; those on board the mail-boat cheered back; all the shipping—except a sinister torpedo-catcher that hissed like an express train—fluttered their sympathy.

"Hurrah!" cried Marcus.

Cheer followed cheer, the gangway descended, and the Eight Guests rushed into the arms of their friends: Mrs. Tracy, Mrs. Mundsley, Mrs. Kington, all wept for joy.

"Billy," wailed Mrs. Tracy, "it was almost worth it—for this!"

Mrs. Chesterfield, self-psychologizing for her book, observed to herself that "there was nothing quite like the emotion of joy!"

The stately lady in mauve muslin folded Emilia in her arms. In the enthusiasm of the moment she also kissed Captain Norbert.

"Dear Arthur! thank heaven you were here."

Marcus cleared his throat. "Emilia," he said, "you'll never know——"

"What we've gone through," murmured Mrs. Arden, helping him on, "never, never."

"Emilia," muttered Marcus tragically in her ear, stumbling on the phrase he wanted, "I've been my own soul in hell till I heard you were safe."

"Marcus has been a great comfort to me," said Mrs. Arden, a signal to all who heard it, including Emilia, that nothing was changed.

But Emilia took her mother aside—swiftly and unhesitatingly. A long course of physical dread had strangely stiffened her moral courage.

"I want to speak to you," she said, leading her off whilst the baggage was being moved to the tug.

Mrs. Arden felt her daughter's fingers tighten nervously on her plump arm.

"I've done with Marcus. You must make him understand it's all over between us. I hate him. It's useless to argue about it. Arthur Norbert and I are to be married as soon as possible."

Mrs. Arden turned pale.

"Arthur must be mad!" she gasped.

"Mad? He's only generous. I made him. He's marrying me"—she paused a moment and added softly—"out of goodness."

Frustrated projects whirled in Mrs. Arden's brain like ragged wheels. She glanced back anxiously at Marcus, who, surrounded by reporters, was speaking to Norbert.

"I want to thank you, Captain Norbert," he was saying, "for so efficiently performing duties that I shall always regret were not mine."

"If it hadn't been for Captain Norbert," said Mrs. Tracy, now wiping her eyes, "none of us would have been here. We should have died of terror and your men of drink."

Here the reporters' pencils worked furiously. Behind Marcus Mrs. Chesterfield was busy with *The Trumpet's* young man.

"When we were alone with the eternities," she dictated, "with nothing but the fear of death between us and the empty spaces of sea and sky, Captain Norbert calmed our terror and gave us energy to live."

"Thanks," said the young man, "that will do nicely. I'll see to it."

But the gangway was raised, the tug's paddles beat the sea, she gave a shrill call from her cabin; the passengers on the mail-boat cheered as she bustled back to the quay where the crowd was waiting.

"I am in a most awkward position, Arthur," said Mrs. Arden. "If, as Emilia tells me, it was the only remedy, it ought to have been thought of before. The excuse is, of course, that thrown together as you were an engagement was the only result. But Marcus——"

"I hate Marcus!" exclaimed Emilia, "and I'll tell him so."

"I think," said Norbert, "we've all danced quite long enough to his music. Look at him."

Surrounded by reporters and ladies, including the guests of *The Dawn*, whose wrath the flattery and feasting had nearly appeased, Marcus was telling the tragic story of his own suffering.

But the tug drew up at the quay, the crowd cheered, six at least of the rescued heroines thrilled with pride,

and in due course all made their way to the special train which was waiting.

"Not a word with you yet, Emilia?" said Marcus as he pushed up to her on the crowded platform.

"Come to-morrow afternoon," she said, "I have something to tell you."

"Something nice?" he asked.

"Something you ought to know."

CHAPTER XXIX

SOMETHING defiant in Emilia's manner and a nervous change in her mother's aroused Mr. Hart's suspicions; but, as he was "running his show," as his friend Altenstein called it, at high pressure his pace was still that of the invincible Marcus who had taken the "Enlighteners' camp by storm. So he shepherded his guests, and a few chosen ones from the band of pressmen who had come in their pursuit, into the special train, and amid the glare and blare, under the slanting beams of the evening sun, the journey to London commenced.

Restored, as it seemed by magic, to the society from which she had been torn, Mrs. Chesterfield, as self-appointed historian of events, hugged impressions to a rekindled intelligence.

"No one," she observed to the young gentleman of fashion representing *The Trumpet*, "who has not experienced it, knows the supreme bliss of being restored to safety and civilization after passing through the Shadow."

A moment's reflection enabled him to grasp her meaning. There was, he replied, no doubt that this was so. He also suggested "The Psychology of Shipwreck" as an excellent title for one of the chapters of her book.

But although one of the seven heroines, with a book full of notes, Mrs. Chesterfield still felt something wanting.

As a student of nice mental states about to burst into authorship she was conscious of inadequacies in the thrilling moment. There was her husband, the General, for instance, whose solid calm seemed to

depreciate the terrors which had so nearly engulfed them. When hopes for their escape in the newspapers were at the lowest, her husband pointed out how he had never quailed. That was his counter-triumph. Evidently he mistook his unimaginative optimism for serenity of mind!

"Sorry you've had such a bad time, Carrie," he had said. "But I knew all through it would turn out all right."

"I'm glad you were less anxious than I feared," Mrs. Chesterfield replied.

"Our friend Marcus is doing it in style, isn't he?" resumed the General. "Wants to spend some of the treasure he didn't find, perhaps. There's a principle of business behind it."

Then he paused and surveyed his wife more carefully.

"You don't look a bit the worse for it, Carrie," he said. "A trifle thinner, perhaps, but that won't hurt you."

This was hard for an imaginative woman to bear, especially when excitement and relief had strung her nerves up to their highest pitch.

Then there was Marcus, whose spell they had promised to break when their hopes had been lowest. Was not that spell still working?

He had come down with trumpet and drum. He had formed them as it were into a sort of procession, so that the world might see him rejoicing at the safety of those whose lives his ostentatious follies had jeopardized.

And now they had all fallen into line at his bidding, and were feasting and laughing and even bragging as though they had "never faced the Eternities" on a sinking ship. Where were their promises and their good resolutions?

Yet what else could they do?

These thoughts passed through her mind as they sat at dinner in the train.

When it was over, and they were leaving the dining-

car one by one, Emilia pressed her arm. They had agreed to say nothing of Miss Arden's engagement to Norbert until she gave them permission. Marcus should hear of it from her.

"If Mr. Hart asks questions tell him the truth," Emilia now said hurriedly.

"Haven't you told him?"

"No, I told him I would tell him to-morrow."

Then she passed on to a seat beside her mother.

Hearing the familiar social cauldron bubbling about her again, Mrs. Chesterfield felt her meaner interests growing to their natural size.

The train consisted of several corridor drawing-room cars opening one into the other; the guests strolled from car to car, laughing, talking, smoking; coffee was being handed round, and Marcus, moving from group to group with his most winning smile on his face; Altenstein was watching him, the General talking to Altenstein.

In one hour after their landing the old game was in full swing again. How could she put that in her book? Could she even suggest it if she dared?

When Norbert and Marcus met, they pretended not to see one another; when Marcus approached Mrs. Arden that lady's smile was not a placid smile.

The side of life which had seemed very small to Mrs. Chesterfield on board the sinking yacht had again become one of its social foundations. She was in the midst of currents and undercurrents, of small jealousies, petty ambitions—the element in which the weight of the Marcus Harts of this world is felt, the element clinging to the human comedy like a garment visible only to eyes which, in Mrs. Chesterfield's latest phrase, have "gazed on the Eternities!"

And now Marcus was coming to her—in his jolliest manner too!

"Haven't scarcely had a word with you yet, Carrie, old girl," he said. "We ought to have a lot to talk about, though, after what we've all gone through! Seems a sort o' dream, doesn't it? Hear you're

writing a book! Let me have a look before you print it. Might give it some hints. What? There are things not quite suited to the public, you know, and women ain't very good judges of what is or what isn't. The General looks well, don't he? But up splendidly he tells me, too! Always on the bright side."

But this was intended for all ears. Lady Horham and Mrs. Wray (Mrs. Upperton's mother) were sitting next to her drinking coffee, and listening as guests usually listen to generous hosts. But Mrs. Upperton, holding a box of French sweetmeats in her hand, beckoned them, and they joined her, and then Marcus sat beside Mrs. Chesterfield, and gave her her chance.

"Carrie," he said, "remember we're pals who must pick up the pieces we leave off at! Tell me—has anything happened? I ought to be prepared for?"

"Of whom are you thinking?" asked Mrs. Chesterfield.

"Of Emilia, of course. Has she been running straight?"

The lady hesitated purposely.

"I've no right, Marcus," she said with trouble in her voice, "I mean—well—it was an understood thing that—— But what makes you ask?"

"The girl's sniffing at me; that's why. Gave me an appointment for to-morrow! Besides, she isn't behaving in the sort o' way I've a right to expect, and it's for you to give me a hint. You're not blind, nor yet squeamish, and she's led me a pretty dance, as you know."

Mrs. Chesterfield had fallen into her customary attitude of gentle sympathy which she assumed in her dealings with Mr. Hart.

"All I know," she said, "is that Emilia's in love with Captain Norbert and wants to marry him. At least she did before she landed—perhaps she will change her mind under the influence of her mother, the duchess, and yourself. I'm dreadfully sorry for you, Marcus, for I know what you feel. But

remember how they have been thrown together, and the strain to which her fidelity to you has been exposed."

"The man looks a perfect devil!" thought the lady behind her sweet manner.

Had Marcus obeyed his natural instincts at that moment, he would have rushed across to the next saloon carriage and battered Emilia's beautiful face with his big hairy fists. Although prepared for revolt, he had never imagined it would be so complete. But intelligence and cunning were in the ascendant, and he knew that he was now fighting a defensive battle. In such conflicts nature must be gagged and handcuffed and thrust back into the darkest cells of self-repression, where her stifled groans and curses are never heard by antagonists or onlookers. It was Marcus's aim to save what he counted his peculiar prestige. Every one of his acts must be thought out. Although the savage was howling within him, if his position in the eyes of the Duchess of Evesham and the other stars of the social firmament in whose rays he was determined to bask, was to be maintained, only the man of chivalry (or Marcus's idea of him), must be seen on the top. Swiftly his brain summed up the situation: he had lost his yacht, he had lost the opportunity of "squaring accounts" by marrying the girl who had troubled his passions, tortured his pride, and lowered his self-respect; still his weight in the social scale was there, and whatever the nature of his rage, that must not be risked. To bend nobly (and wait a better chance of adjusting balances) was evidently his right policy.

So Marcus rose to his part, and what he believed was a melancholy smile appeared on his grim face.

"Thank you, Carrie," said he. "It's an awful blow to me, but I must bear it like a man. Emilia's happiness, after all, is the principal thing to be considered. If that is assured, whatever I may suffer I shall not complain."

With that he rose and left her,

She knew that she had driven her claws into him as far as she could; she had seen him writhe, perhaps she had hoped to hear him scream, but he had revealed himself as the kindly and worthy creature of comedy, whose simple and noble qualities were for the popular measure of virtue in plays for the people.

What was the meaning of it?

Emilia meanwhile had watched them. When Mr. Hart disappeared in the furthest carriage, where the men were smoking his cigars, she left her mother and took the seat beside Mrs. Chesterfield.

"Well?" she inquired. "Well?"

"I've prepared him," replied the other, hoping that Marcus was not watching them.

"What did he say?"

"He was ~~showing~~—quite a new Marcus! Your happiness is the only thing to be considered! I that was assured, whatever happened he wouldn't complain."

"Thank you," Emilia answered.

Then she returned to her mother and told her.

"Most generous and kind!" replied Mrs. Arden, but without quite recognizing Marcus in the part.

Everything that this harassed lady had accepted as "nearly settled" was now in a state of turmoil. Her faith in solid things, moreover, had been shaken by many days' anxiety. There were trials against which Society ought, she thought, to protect a good woman like herself anxious only to do the best for her family! But Emilia had always been headstrong and self-willed, and Arthur Norbert was now quite as bad. He insisted that an almost immediate marriage was the only way out of the difficulty. He seemed stern, almost reproachful, she thought. As though she were responsible for what Emilia had brought about! The semi-engagement was quite Emilia's work. What was she to tell Marcus? What was she to tell her cousin the duchess? What would people think? It all seemed so hurried, rash and headstrong!

Then, with a face that no longer concealed her

agitation, Mrs. Arden questioned Lady Horham, who, as Emilia's chaperon during the cruise, was not quite irresponsible for what had occurred. But Lady Horham agreed with Captain Norbert, and urged an immediate marriage whilst the glamour was still on the attractive couple. The solemnity of her manner impressed Mrs. Arden. "If," she said, "you had seen what I have seen you wouldn't hesitate."

Then she told her how, one awful day when they were crouching together waiting for the yacht to sink, they had all confessed—confessed the mean things that Marcus Hart had tempted them to commit. "Perhaps," Lady Horham went on, whilst Mrs. Arden listened aghast at what now seemed so unnecessary, if not in bad taste, "perhaps we were hysterical, possibly terror had made us half mad, but it was very real and it came from our hearts. After we were saved Carrie Chesterfield made a note of it and we all signed it. We all agreed that we hated the man, and that we had tried to exploit him, but that he had exploited us. Oh, it was a dreadful conversation, and has become an awful memory! It seemed we were far enough from the man and ourselves to see things in their real light. It's all different now. We were out of the world then, now we're back to it; but we've decided never to speak of it again for Emilia's sake—even if what has happened since didn't make it impossible for her to marry the man."

Mrs. Arden protested that Marcus wasn't worse than other men of the type, but Lady Horham replied that there were questions outside argument for those who had gone through their agonies of fear on board *The Dawn*, and this was one of them.

"Don't forget," she said, "we all had repented. Marcus Hart seemed to represent the life we promised to abandon—if we were given a chance!"

Thus, amidst the rush and excitement of this half public return, with the roar of the train in her ears mingling with the gaiety and laughter of the guests,

and the din of much feasting in a narrow space, it was forced on Mrs. Arden that the marriage between Marcus and her daughter was impossible, and, because of her many promises, she feared to meet his eye.

Then a little later, having made an effort to adjust her mind to the change, she called Norbert to her and tried, as she said, "to scold him"; supposed that they must all make the best of it, as poor Mr. Hart was making the best of it! Marcus, she said, was behaving quite beautifully—for theories flattering to his conduct had long ago become necessary to the support of hers. It appeared that he knew all about this rash engagement, yet, crushing as it must be to his hopes, he had said that Emilia's happiness was the only thing to be considered.

But, as Mrs. Arden afterwards told the duchess, Arthur took it in the worst possible spirit. Hart, he said, had a part to play, and was playing it on the grand scale. It was Marcus in the great character of Marcus-Barnum. They were just part of the show.

But she supposed all men were jealous at times.

For the rest of the journey Mrs. Arden thought regretfully of her frustrated ambitions. A man of vast wealth had so nearly been her son-in-law. In his stead a young man had been thrust upon her whose melancholy prospects might without effrontery expect an allowance.

It was past nine when the train ran into Paddington. Emilia lingered a moment in the car with Norbert.

"You've saved me," she said, "and I'll love you all my life for it."

"I've saved myself," he said gently. "Now we shall have to live on nothing a year like the people we've been taught to laugh at. But look at them!"

There, amid the crowd of welcoming friends on the platform, stood Mrs. Arden and Mr. Hart in earnest conversation.

"I'm helpless, my dear Marcus," Mrs. Arden was saying. "To me it's an enormous disappointment, but the romance of it was too much for them, the poor

things were flung together—Arthur behaved so magnificently, and so have you, but what girl's heart would bear the strain? If you had been there, of course, it would have been the same thing with you. Love like theirs—rash and unreasoning—comes in such emergencies. You and I can only bow to the inevitable, Marcus. Whatever happens it is my devout hope—my prayer, I might almost say—that nothing may disturb our friendship.”

To this Marcus replied that Emilia's happiness was still his most ardent desire, and that, under the circumstances, he could only hope that it would be secured.

At this point Mrs. Arden saw her cousin the duchess approaching, and flying to her, whispered the news.

“Just what I expected,” replied the duchess. “It serves the man Hart right, my dear, but I'm sorry for you.”

Then she folded Emilia in her arms. When greetings were over, Mrs. Arden whispered to the duchess.

“Do come back with us,” she said, “and talk to Emilia. She is beyond me.”

“It's gone too far,” her cousin replied, “but I'll try.”

The three went to Sloane Street in the duchess's carriage.

CHAPTER XXX

DRIVING home through the familiar streets, with twilight still lingering in a faint saffron gleam in the western sky, Emilia was too tired to think; the raw facts only stood out in her mind.

She loved Norbert, Norbert loved her; they had been blown by strange winds, scourged by unknown emotions, of this turmoil had sprung the desire to forget the past, with its shame and weaknesses, its dust and ashes of burnt-out doubts and petty cares. Before her was the new future promised by her lover. She was in no mood to quail before the duchess when they were alone in the drawing-room that looked smaller, narrower and lower, fuller of unnecessary things which had once seemed necessary. Under the clear cold light flashed by an experience balanced between life and death, familiar things shrank. After what she had gone through what need she fear?

"Emilia," said the duchess, "ever since you were a child, when your mother couldn't manage you, she made me try."

"Poor mother!" she answered. "She is disappointed, although, if she would see things as they are, she oughtn't to be."

"Oughtn't to be!" repeated the duchess, much more interested than she pretended. "Wait till you are your normal self again. I doubt whether you and Arthur Norbert yet realize what you're going to face. He is, or at least was, a man of the world. I can't believe that has been washed out of him!"

"All manner of things have been washed out of

us," replied Emilia. "But it's a change to feel, not to talk of!"

"I know all about that—emotional transcendentalism it used to be called; only I dare say it's quite the wrong word for it now," replied the duchess placidly, though considering a problem aloud to herself rather than regarding the effect of her views of it on her young relative.

But Emilia listened unperturbed and almost dreamily.

"I had five minutes' talk with Arthur on the platform, and gathered that you intended to be married at once," resumed the duchess.

"You see, we don't expect—I almost said we don't want—to be rich," replied Emilia. Then she smiled and added, "Perhaps because it's foolishness enough to be alive!"

But the duchess, although the occasion tempted her, determined not to be sentimental, and therefore clutched at a fact.

"Arthur told me," she said, "that this secretaryship to the new Military Commission will last about six months—of course, with its special pay and allowances. He hopes—people always do hope—that it may lead to something else. So it seems to me, Emilia, that his secretaryship and your joint hopes are practically the only available assets to begin housekeeping on. If you are prepared to lead 'the simple life' every one is now talking about, which means doing without everything which I've always understood you wanted most, and if shipwreck has etherealized Arthur to the same extent, there's no reason why you shouldn't try the experiment—especially as you are trying it on yourselves."

To the duchess's wonder Emilia was as free from excitement as herself.

"There are things not worth arguing about because they are fixed and settled," she said. "My marriage with Arthur is one of them. I love him. He—he—but I won't try to tell you what he has been to me

—for what he is. Unless you had seen the sea rising and the deck sinking, the empty sky and emptier horizon glaring at us, and saying ‘Just one hour more!’—we can’t expect you to understand us. I hope you won’t think I’m talking like a fool when I tell you that Arthur and I have come out of a world—a world on the verge of things—which bears no resemblance to the one we’ve just been restored to. We don’t intend to forget here what we learnt there!”

“And that, I suppose, means,” said her grace in her even voice, “that the only thing which counts is love. Tennyson—I’m not quite sure it is Tennyson—but at any rate one of the poets, has written a poem to that effect. I remember reading it at school. Perhaps that’s what one of those excited ladies at the station meant just now when she told me you had brought back ‘the treasure’ with you after all!”

But here the duchess perceived that Emilia was very tired; moreover, she had no intention of vainly trying to obstruct a match already the talk of her set; so dropping her tolerantly critical manner for a more partial key of sympathy, she said, that since both of them were bent on the marriage, it was useless to discuss it. She and the duke would do what they could. “But now go to bed, my dear,” she added kindly. “I’ll talk it over with your mother and prevent her fretting, if I can.” With that she kissed Emilia, and went to the dining-room, where her cousin was waiting, and took exactly the opposite view to that on which she had dwelt in the drawing-room.

In every way but a vulgar and mercenary, the marriage would be an ideal one. Emilia was a fortunate young woman, Captain Norbert a chivalrous, unselfish gentleman. Mrs. Arden ought to congratulate herself on such a son-in-law, especially after reflecting what she had been spared in the other dreadful man. The only thing that worried the duchess was how “the man Hart” might take it. If he chose he might be “nasty!”

"He's taking it admirably," sighed Mrs. Arden.
"Then," replied the duchess, "I'll go to my well-earned rest. Good-night, Emily; don't fret because you're too material and unpoetic to see in what has happened a blessing not even disguised."

With this the duchess departed, quite forgetting how Marcus's suit had formerly been blessed with her support.

An hour later Mrs. Arden, going to Emilia's room, found her in a deep sleep.

As a matchmaker she was compelled to admit herself beaten. There was, however, one consolation, which she could appreciate. Her daughter's wedding would be one of the most attractive, picturesque, and talked about ever celebrated in London. Emilia would be married from Grosvenor Square, the duke would give her away, all their friends would gush! But what was this in comparison with Marcus's millions?

As this recurrent comparison grew dimmer and dimmer in her mind, Mrs. Arden fell asleep.

Hours before, in the little room that now seemed extraordinarily luxurious because of its promise of profound security, her daughter had fallen asleep, wondering what she should say to Mr. Hart.

The maid next morning, who woke her from a dreamless sleep, brought a letter setting her doubts at rest.

"DEAR EMILIA" [Marcus wrote in his meaningless, commercial hand],—"No man in the world is capable of making greater sacrifices for you than myself—not even the gallant gentleman who now claims privileges which I once fondly hoped would be mine. It is, therefore, with a sore heart that I yield to what I know is your wish, and set you free. Still, nothing can rob me of the respect and affection in which I shall always hold you, and I trust you will always permit me ever to remain,

"Your friend,

"MARCUS HART."

"P.S.—To-morrow I go to Winchford, and shall be there for the rest of the summer."

The letter was shown to Mrs. Arden, who sighed and described it as just the letter a man of Marcus's kindly nature would write.

It was also shown to Norbert, who depreciated it.

"First he dazzles us," he said, "then he shipwrecks us, then he forgives us, then we admire him for it. It is all according to rule."

"A most generous thing to say," Mrs. Arden replied, "especially when you think what the poor man might have written. In any case Emilia's feelings have been spared."

"I think," replied Norbert, "that our friend is measuring the distance for a jump in another direction. He has retired to his magnificent solitude at Winchford to form new plans. I hear it's uncertain whether he will endow politics or philanthropy. He has adroitly touched both."

The duchess also read the "amazing letter," as she called it, and, because Mr. Hart's weight in the world was what she had heard described as "a constant factor," and because she had taken him up warmly after seeing him honoured by favours even more august than those which it was in her power to bestow, she found it was against all the tenets of her social faith to drop him as though he represented a mere error in her judgment.

"I think," she said, "he ought to be told he has behaved better than we thought he could."

To this Mrs. Arden agreed, and, as head of the family, the duchess wrote Marcus what she described as "one of her nicest letters."

Marcus, when he received it, handed it to his friend Altenstein, who was staying at Winchford in his rôle of sympathetic friend.

"This," observed Marcus with his rather repulsive smile, "is what comes of playing the game according to rule. But I don't quite see what the old girl

mean when she talks about the 'island-valley of Avignon' where I'm to get cured 'of my grievous wound.'"

But his friend explained the nature of the compliment, and Marcus perceived that it was quite pretty and sentimental.

"King Arthur, the chap in the poem," Altenstein pointed out, "is supposed to return to the world and carry everything before him. The duchess means you've bigger chances before you."

"She always knew I had grief," Marcus replied; "I will say that for her."

So, in the most modest and feeling terms that his memory and imagination stimulated by his secretary could devise, he thanked her grace for a letter which would, he said, if anything could, assuage the grief feeding on his heart.

But whilst Mr. Hart was pursuing his policy of "keeping out of it for a bit," and making such arrangements with his skipper as rendered all unpleasant disclosures as nearly improbable as human interests and bonds can make them, the seven heroines, as they were called, found themselves brilliant lionesses in a world to which, as Mrs. Chesterfield remarked, "they had been almost miraculously restored."

"So nice to think they are all so proud of us!" said Mrs. Tracy to Mrs. Kington and Mrs. Mundsley. She meant that their husbands, relatives and friends were all basking in the reflected glory. Their portraits were in every paper, their autographs were scrambled for by youthful collectors, their patronage claimed for social enterprises at which duchesses were scarcely regarded as rarities. Their conduct was held up as a shining example in more than one fashionable pulpit, and even accepted by the exacting, as evidence that the spirit of the race had not decayed. "The Seven," the press repeated, "were an honour to their sex and their set." The other Enlighteners glowed under the flattering light cast on

them by their committee. As Mrs. Upperton admitted to Lady Horham, Marcus had given them the chance of their lifetime, and they would be fools to miss it!

"To be envied," as *The Ladies' Sceptic* observed, "as elegant *mondaines* and revered asponents of the highest womanly virtues, was to achieve a triumph granted to few of their sex. Their names," this picturesque writer predicted, "will be remembered with those of French Jeanne and British Grace, and other heroines of moving story."

But at the centre of this agreeable warmth was Emilia Arden, and, possibly on account of Norbert's contempt for those whom, without defining his meaning, he called "the boomsters," she was reluctantly compelled to recognize a certain amount of "silliness" in the excitement.

For Norbert, now busy with his War Office Commission, well knew that a man in the enjoyment of a very flattering advertisement, from the male point of view inadequately earned, is scarcely admired by his fellows, so he wisely sought the background, describing himself as a failure suddenly thrown into the lime-light but with no taste for the performance.

The marriage was fixed for the last week in July. As Mrs. Chesterfield constantly repeated, "it would bring the great drama to a fitting close before the interest of the spectators was exhausted."

The kith and kin both of bride and bridegroom rising to the occasion, did as much as could be expected of them, although the strain was a mixed delight to the impoverished Norberts, by whom Quirl was redecorated and partly refurnished for their kinsman—a fact which induced the journals chronicling such matters to announce that the bride and bridegroom would spend their honeymoon at Captain Norbert's "charming old place in the country." The illustrated papers at the same time published photographs of the "famous yew-tree walk," courteously

eliminating the fact that a cabbage-garden threatened the drawing-room windows.

The wedding "in the blaze of publicity" took place at St. Margaret's, Westminster. The crowd was so great and the traffic so much impeded that an angry gentleman, who missed his train at Waterloo in consequence, wrote to *The Times* to suggest that "fashionable weddings ought not to take place in central localities during the busiest hours of the day." When this correspondent read the names of "those present at the ceremony" he was told that he had only signed himself "Vacuus Victor." Though by some accident the name of Mr. Marcus Hart appeared in this list he was not present, but the chroniclers were well "within the truth" when they described the "rope of pearls" which he presented to the bride as "magnificent."

When she received them Emilia winced. Mrs. Arden even thought that perhaps she had better say nothing to Arthur till after they were married, in case "he might make a fuss." Emilia, however, displayed them; they were, she said, either perquisites of her position, or symbols of her humiliation; in any case gems to be made the best of. She had had so many things she didn't deserve that even "a rope of pearls" couldn't seriously increase her obligation. Norbert, suffering from a poor man's embarrassment under a hail of gifts, supposed that Emilia could scarcely return them to the donor with the request that they might be exchanged for "a silver button-hook or something else useful."

"I do wish Arthur wouldn't sneer so!" said Mrs. Arden after he had gone.

"A man is always ridiculous at a wedding," observed the duchess; "and I've no doubt the poor fellow has been a good deal teased. Besides, he never did justice to Mr. Hart."

On the wedding day the "other six" were in a tremor of excitement—especially Mrs. Upperton, who the week before accepted an offer of marriage from

young Lord Blackmore, the Marquis of Hawkberry's eldest son. It was true that he was eight years her junior, and that his family resented the match, but at any rate it was a love-match, and probably, as the Marquis recognized, prevented the ardent young gentleman from inflicting on them a wife chosen from the world of musical comedy, to which, as an amateur of great promise, his heir had been dangerously attracted. Blackmore admitted to his friends that it was quite as much Mrs. Upperton's glamour as one of the heroines of *The Dawn* under her "snap" and matronly charms that had captured his affections. When the "other five" heard of the engagement, they were, in spite of their efforts to be glad, only indifferently pleased. It seemed to affect the symmetry of a drama in which they were moving towards the close. Whilst their heroine was marrying a penniless soldier, an agreeable, but still a minor character, considerably past the first blush of her beauty, was rewarded with the hand of the heir to one of "our great historic houses." This sense of disproportion made itself felt, and Lady Horham, in spite of her determination to be enthusiastic, forgot herself so far as to tell Mrs. Upperton, who was complaining of the hostile attitude of the marchioness, that under the circumstances she really didn't see how Polly could expect Lord Blackmore's people to quite jump at the match. Fortunately bitterness among "the Seven" could go no further than this. To keep themselves well in hand, and on the side of the generous virtues, when any lapse was threatened on the part of one of their number, they had agreed to say, "Remember *The Dawn*!"

And with these three simple words Mrs. Upperton now made Lady Horham blush.

So, remembering *The Dawn*, the six heroines (including the bride) kissed Mrs. Upperton and wished her joy, whereat Mrs. Upperton, touched almost to tears, replied that it was sweet of them, and far more than she deserved.

But the duchess frowned when she heard of it.

Had young Lord Blackmore stood in Norbert's shoes, the parts being reversed, the balances, she thought, would have been judiciously adjusted.

If, then, there was a faint cloud shadowing the serenity of Emilia's marriage, it was cast by the splendour of Mrs. Upperton's threatened match.

CHAPTER XXXI

IN A great house at Winchford, behind miles of park and forest, Mr. Hart looked on sulkily at his rival's nuptials, chocking the sentimental raptures they called forth. It was unnecessary for Altenstein to hint that the marriage was due to Marcus's mismanagement, since the latter admitted as much. In dealing with solid things, in the traffic of life, his pitiless success had tempted him to regard his cunning as infallible. He now perceived that he had been defeated in a matter needing nicer handling. He had acted as though love and hate, pride and desire, hope and fear, all the irrational weaknesses that lurk in a young woman's heart, were sentiments entirely governed by the simple laws of self-interest. His mistake was to have believed this too much. It was his ill-luck to have submitted them to the only strain he could imagine at which they could break. It was his mismanagement. He ought to have foreseen that, in getting Norbert on board his yacht, he risked producing the situation of which their marriage became the inevitable sequel.

The very advertisement he had given them had made all their friends look at their meagre cheque-books! The match which, before the fatal cruise, had seemed too ridiculous to be seriously considered even by the contracting parties, was rendered almost obligatory by the romantic forces it had let loose.

Mr. Hart in his contemplative wrath told his friend the baron (a deeply interested observer) that the world was peopled by a lot of "sentimental rotters!"

"You don't suppose," he said, "that the girl really

wanted to marry that chap and chuck up all this sort of thing" (here he glanced from his windows across the glories of his park, on which August was glowing), "or that the chap himself wished to marry the girl! They were dragged into it. The whole lot of 'em were driven crazy by gush—the sort of stuff that sticks in novels for school-girls, and, because they were the centre of the silly storm, they had to obey it."

"By mistake you provided them with parts to play," observed the philosophic Altenstein, "and they rose to them. In any case they are two of the victims if you're the third!"

"Me a victim!" growled Mr. Hart. "I was never a victim in my life except of a confounded piece of clumsy ill-luck like this."

"But there's another side to it," resumed his ironical friend. "You mustn't forget you're the real hero of the story. Without you there would have been no romance. You manufactured it for them. You created what the critics call the 'atmosphere.' You've only to read that woman's silly book to see that. She is devilish anxious to do justice to you, Marcus!"

Here Altenstein took, from the table beside him, the copy of *The Cruise and Loss of "The Dawn,"* which Mrs. Chesterfield in an affectionate preface had just dedicated to her "old and dear friend, the owner of the beautiful but ill-fated *Dawn*."

Marcus scowled at the book although the writer, in spite of her "repentance," had, as an early review in *The Trumpet* pointed out, "done the fullest justice to the gallant yachtsman and high-spirited gentleman who had paid so dearly, not only in anxiety but in material loss, for the miscarriage of the expedition."

"Mr. Hart," this impartial critic further pointed out, "brought back no treasure—unless failure bravely borne and bitter disappointment cheerfully endured are the jewels of adversity—but he and his fair friends have shown us that the Viking spirit is still alive."

This judicious praise had called forth a smile even from the sullen Marcus.

But unfortunately, another name was constantly held up to the reader for admiration.

"If that chap Norbert had twopence to bless himself with," said Marcus, "you'd fancy he had paid old Carrie Chesterfield for the puff."

"They tell me Norbert's rather sick," replied Altenstein; "his pals are chaffing his head off. It's the sort of going soldiers care for. I've an idea that poor fellow would have been better without it. It's a good thing for him the book appeared after his marriage. From his wife are enjoying their bliss down at his ramshackle place in the country. The young woman, they tell me, is taking up chicken-farming,—*par distraction*, I suppose! The duchess says they are setting an example of the 'simple life.'"

"What's the 'simple life'?" asked Marcus, purposely forgetting how he had been baited with it.

"The sort of life in which the man blacks his own boots and his wife's too, if he has been at Eton," replied Altenstein. "There's to be a run on 'Simplicity.' Simple goodness, Sunday school virtue, secret charity, 'sweetness and light,' and all the rest of it, is to be the next pose. Your duchess—I never said your only duchess, Marcus!—says we must bring in a new era. When you return from the 'island valley of Avilion' where her grace consigned you, she'll explain! All the light of the Enlighteners is to be turned on to the craze. She's been caught by your friends, the female Vikings! 'The Seven,' including the bride, as old Carrie's book here shows, 'repented,' and all promised (if spared) to 'leave off being selfish and loving mean things.' When any of them feel wicked they just whisper 'Remember *The Dawn*!' and they feel quite like Vestals. I had it from Polly Upperton! Marcus, you've made Polly!"

"I know that," replied Mr. Hart modestly. "That young fool Blackmore would never have looked at the old girl if I hadn't found her a halo. As it is the marquis ought to certify the lad and lock him up till the rot's blown over. But you don't mean to tell me

there's anything behind this 'simple life' business which the papers are all bleating about!"

"It's as serious as rot can be! The well-dressed impudent freaks the American newspapers call 'society leaders' have decided to recognize this 'moral reformation.' The duchess has caught to the idea. But Grace is nothing if not practical. 'Work, not words,' is her new motto—she'll let you know all about it in good time, Marcus—she'll want your help. It has been pointed out to her by an august personage, that a 'Home for Orphans' on something like the scale of Greenwich Hospital would be acceptable. The duchess has received permission to call the home 'The Enlighteners' Home for the Fatherless' if she can raise what's generally called a certain sum. Philanthropy and simplicity, Marcus, is to be the new cry."

"Well," said Marcus, "if the duchess wants me, you bet she'll send for me."

And he was right: a few days later he received another of her Grace's "nice letters," inviting him to Gowty Castle, the duke's place in Ross-shire, where Marcus could shoot at stags or grouse, and give her his invaluable advice on "a scheme of almost national importance."

This summons Marcus obeyed, and, quitting the majestic solitude in the south, joined the duchess in the north. It was in consequence of this combination of talent that "The Enlighteners' Home for Fatherless Children" first shaped itself as a project.

Mr. Hart accepted the post of honorary secretary of the scheme.

Careless observers of this gentleman's character, Mrs. Tracy, Mrs. Kingston, and Mrs. Upperton for instance, had predicted a plunge into "dissipation" for the assuagement of his sorrows; shrewder observers, who knew the value of professional philanthropy, were not surprised to find him seeking consolation in good works. As he told his friend the Bishop of Burley, one of his most active and

admiring colleagues, "because he (Marcus) was an idle man was no reason for his being a useless one." They lived in an age, he further asserted, when every one was supposed to pull his own weight. "Even," his lordship broke in humorously, "the bishops." His lordship afterwards described Marcus as a man of excellent intentions and no less practical Christian activity. It was thus that Mr. Hart caught the spirit of the movement, even on its most orthodox side.

But time is necessary for growth. In due season the crops will bring forth their fruit; and the anniversary of the wreck of *The Dawn* had not come round before "The Enlighteners' Home" had funds at the bank, under the philanthropic finance of Mr. Marcus Hart, sufficient to allow a beautiful and illustrious lady to lay the foundation stone.

Never had financial ability devoted to philanthropy speedier or more practical results. From the outset the "Home" had been (as the newspapers constantly reminded its readers) Mr. Hart's "labour of love." The ability, the unselfish industry he devoted to its interests gave a dignity and value to his name with which not even his success as a captain of finance had endowed it.

When, therefore, on the first anniversary of the wreck of *The Dawn*, it was announced—possibly by way of a gentle assuagement to a bitter memory—that a baronetcy had been conferred on "this able and efficient man of affairs," as the newspapers described him to avoid an unpicturesque repetition of his name, it was generally felt by a large and increasing circle of friends in all classes that "merits which deserved recognition had not been overlooked."

In the evening of the bright June day on which Marcus's name was thus honoured, Mrs. Kingston gave a dinner to Mrs. Chesterfield, Lady Horham, Mrs. Tracy, Mrs. Mundsley, and Lady Blackmore (better known as Polly Upperton) now a five months' bride.

From this little festival to celebrate the first

anniversary of their rescue, Emilia, who was in Egypt, where her husband, now Major Norbert, held an appointment, alone was absent.

"Remember *The Dawn!*" was still among them a moral signal of serious import, although the world had almost forgotten that they were heroines, and careless people had been known to connect *The Dawn* with the *Little Revenge* which "down by the island came" and

"Was lost evermore in the main."

Perhaps the "six" felt a little saddened to find themselves, after Emilia's wedding, daily receding from the gaze of the sympathetic. Fortunately they had decided to "live their own lives" and not "to expect too much from the world." Other beauties, they knew, must succeed them, other stars rise and shine in the bright places lately illumined by their own brief glories. Even as they dined, they silently admitted, they were not the force they once were. After enthusiasm comes reaction. Envious critics, even when their fame was fullest, had not scrupled to complain that "too much fuss was being made about the precious 'Seven,'" and that good taste recognized limits even in advertisement.

Still the Six, as prominent members of the Enlighteners, were not unknown as charming advocates of the "Simple Life"—a movement already beginning to wane. However, they "hoped they did their best," tried to recognize duties, to spend less than they could afford, to talk less scandal than friends deserved, and although they were all of them still "quite nice" to Marcus, and had never (as they intended in the fullest blast of their repentance) "told him what a beast they thought him," they no longer committed the vulgar indiscretion of "running after him." Mrs. Chesterfield, Lady Horham, and Mrs. Kington had not, as they had threatened, sold "for the benefit of charity" those little diamond owls which Mr. Hart had presented them with on a certain

memorable occasion; it was, they agreed, foolish to carry things too far—not had Mrs. Tracy or Mrs. Mundsley expressed themselves more than once as “disappointed” because Emilia had kept the rope of pearls, Marcus’s princely wedding gift. Even in the conduct of repentant souls pledged themselves to commit no meannesses, fanatics would find no fault. Good resolutions need not destroy good taste. However, as Mrs. Tracy complained, when you have repented, it isn’t always easy to remember what you repented about.

Still, as a symbol of their better purpose, there was always the “little *Dawn* Pledge,” as they called it, signed at Mrs. Chesterfield’s desire after they had left the decks of the sinking yacht and tasted the first bliss of security. On the publication of her book, Mrs. Chesterfield, now their moral leader, had given her six friends illuminated copies of “The Pledge,” with the injunction to “look at it in bad moments”; and this talisman against meanness they all piously treasured in pretty ivory cases. They had promised, too, “to keep an eye on each other,” and whether the result of this supervision, or whether it sprang from some inner moral change difficult to analyze, the Six (for Emilia, lost to the circle by her marriage, expressed no opinion) collectively felt themselves “growing better women.”

The dinner, given in a private room in a famous new restaurant, and as simply as the splendour of the hotel would allow, had ended in bowls of strawberries and cream, partly because in their misery on the battered deck of *The Dawn* both Mrs. Tracy and Mrs. Mundsley had felt a feverish longing for this luscious mixture, and partly because their rescue synchronized with the height of the strawberry season.

The servants had gone, the windows opening on the trees of the Park let in the last gleam of the western sky that mingled with the glow from the shaded lights. The tops of the trees murmured under the

roll of the Piccadilly traffic. One pale star, swimming in the faint sky, gathered strength as it rose.

"What a contrast—what a heavenly contrast!" murmured Mrs. Mundsley.

"And it's just a year ago," said Lady Blackmore lighting a cigarette.

The smoke rose slowly till it reached the top of the candles, then vanished swiftly through the window.

"I wish Emilia were here, poor dear!" said Mrs. Tracy.

"Why poor dear?" asked Lady Blackmore.

"What! don't you know?"

Then she whispered something. Lady Blackmore's face grew serious for a moment with sympathy, for she knew what was expected of her too.

"They'll be able to come home in August," said Lady Horham cheerfully.

"Major Norbert won't," said Mrs. Chesterfield. "He is on what the General calls 'a special job.'"

"The baby and mother, I mean," replied Lady Horham.

"What changes a year can bring!" observed Mrs. Kington, glancing critically at Lady Blackmore. "Looking back at that awful time I can't believe I'm the same woman."

"I'm not, thank goodness!" said Lady Blackmore lipily.

Mrs. Chesterfield coughed faintly but uneasily.

"I hope," she said, "that we've forgotten something as well as learnt something."

"I have an idea," said Mrs. Kington, breaking the silence called forth by this shadow of reproof, "that Marcus thought he ought to be asked to-day."

"What makes you think so?" some one asked.

"The telegram he sent," replied Mrs. Kington.

She read it aloud: "Am with you in spirit."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mrs. Tracy.

"Sir Marcus hasn't done yet," observed Mrs. Chesterfield. "Whatever one thinks of him one can't

forget his great ability. "As the General says," he'll go farther. The baronetcy is only a step, of course." "Not to the Peerage!" cried Lady Blackmore in dismay.

"Yes," replied the other dryly, "why not? He has gains at all events."

"Better keep brains of that sort for the pop-shop," my 'boy' says," retorted Lady Blackmore in the tone of a woman with a private interest threatened.

"Men like Marcus will flounder to the top," said Mrs. Kingston. "Compare him and Arthur Norbert, for instance—how they hated one another—but there's no doubt whose weight will tell."

"One," said Mrs. Chesterfield, "will end as a peer, the other *may* become a Major-General on the retired list. Still I shall always say that we owe the man something."

"Our experience, what!" said Lady Blackmore, mimicking the new baronet's manner.

"I suppose," observed Mrs. Tracy, "that's why we've forgiven him! If we are—really are better women—we owe it to him!"

But this was a side of the question which had never occurred to them collectively before.

"Bosh!" exclaimed Lady Blackmore, whose audacity a youthful husband and the shadow of the peerage had increased. "I say bosh! None of us had a row with the man because it would have been so awfully inconvenient. Marcus represents, as far as we're concerned, a sort of institution, and nobody's idiotic enough to have a row with an institution."

"What an appalling thing to say, Polly!" said Lady Horham, in mild reproach.

"Because it's true!" retorted the other.

"But is it true?" asked Mrs. Mundsley.

"Ask Arthur Norbert the next time he's home. You'll find he agrees with me," said Lady Blackmore. "He'll prove to you there's a sort of philosophy behind it all."

"I know he would," said Mrs. Chesterfield, whom

the success of her book had taught to regard the manners and customs of her acquaintances as a manufacturer of bricks regards the clay, "and in a manner Arthur Norbert is right. I've a—well—a theory on the subject."

She looked at the others to see if their interest had been stirred. Perceiving that it was not, she added, "And the only reason I've never spoken of it before is because it is associated with a most startling piece of scandal."

The others now looked eager.

"Tell us," said Mrs. Kingston.

"The theory?" asked Mrs. Chesterfield.

"No, the scandal which set it going," said Lady Blackmore boldly.

"My maid's aunt went to Blackpool a few weeks ago, and there she met some one who knew the wife of Captain West."

"Our skipper?" inquired Mrs. Kingston.

"Odious man with his red nose!" exclaimed Mrs. Tracy.

"Yes, the skipper," resumed Mrs. Chesterfield. "Well, it seems that my maid's aunt, who is a very superior woman, became intimate with Mrs. West's friend; both were Baptists or Wesleyans or something. They met at chapel and exchanged invitations to tea. Naturally they talked about my book, which Mrs. West's friend had read. 'But,' exclaimed Mrs. West's friend one day to my maid's aunt (I've forgotten her name) 'what an extraordinary book Mrs. Chesterfield might have written if she had only known that the whole thing was arranged by the owner of the yacht to give those ladies a lesson!'"

"What sort of lesson?" asked Lady Horham, greatly astonished.

"I gathered," continued Mrs. Chesterfield, "for the story was very confused, that Marcus considered us too—well—artificial, and intended taking it out of us by rubbing us against some of the sterner realities of life. To do this he thought out the

Treasure hunt in order to give us an opportunity of seeing the discomfort and anxiety which surround those who do the rough work of the world. Looked at in this light one does see a certain moral idea behind the—experiment shall I call it? But owing to some blunder on the part of the skipper, or of the mistake on the part of the owner, it nearly ended in a tragedy.”

Chesterfield stopped and studied her effect. The faces of her friends were clouded with mingled astonishment and wounded vanity.

“I believe it’s true!” exclaimed Mrs. Tracy.

“The man’s capable of anything when I think of it seriously,” cried Mrs. Kington indignantly.

“It’s ridiculous!” said matter-of-fact Lady Horham.

“My boy should bring an action for damages against Marcus if I believed it true!” added Lady Blackmore.

“I thought I should interest you,” said Mrs. Chesterfield complacently. “The extraordinary thing is that, if Marcus had been a man of a different type—a fanatical believer in doing other people good at all risks, for instance—if might—it really might—have represented an experiment which such a man would attempt; but for the practical Marcus, the comfort-loving, selfish, genial Marcus, the idea is preposterous. But I questioned him about it. At first he was—I won’t say dismayed—but annoyed. It looked, he said, like the attempt of some sea-faring scamp to blackmail him. It was whilst we were discussing this possibility that my theory about it entered my mind. Marcus accepted it conclusive. The story came through a chapel, you see. It concerned the much-abused class to which we belong. We can’t expect people of that sort to understand—well—women like you, Polly” (Lady Blackmore smiled), “or Nellie, or Gertie—in fact any of our set.”

“Don’t except your clever self!” Lady Blackmore suggested.

“Well, you see the respectable people in the little

shop-parlours look on us as wicked, wasteful and frivolous, whilst we think we're only natural, charming and witty. They would like to see us punished for doing the things which we only seem to them to be doing. Out of this queer jumble of ideas I can quite understand that a legend might grow not unlike the odd story which Captain West's wife's friend told the maid's aunt!"

"Goodness!" exclaimed Lady Blackmore.

"The story, I know, loses something owing to my bad memory for names," said Mrs. Chesterfield.

"But what does Marcus think?" asked Lady Horham.

"Yes, what *does* he think?" Mrs. Mundsley joined in. "It's—to put it mildly—a little rough on Marcus!"

"But don't you remember—I do perfectly," said Mrs. Tracy excitedly, "that we thought Marcus was doing it on purpose?"

"My dear Nellie, it was you who thought so," said Mrs. Chesterfield. "Your mind was going through the same process as that of the chapel-people, although, of course, for a different cause. You were almost distracted. Besides, none of us remember quite what we all said. However, Marcus didn't let the matter drop; he wired for his skipper, who is still in his employment, although he hasn't got a new yacht yet, and when West inquired into the story he discovered that my theory exactly anticipated the explanation. Still, it's an extraordinary coincidence, as Marcus says. He wants me to write a book about it. Perhaps I will some day."

But at this point young Lord Blackmore called for his wife, and the first anniversary *Dawn* dinner ended, after it had been arranged that Lady Blackmore should be hostess on the following 25th of June.

As they went down to their carriages Mrs. Tracy, Mrs. Mundsley, and even careless Lady Blackmore were conscious of new and unpleasant doubt.

"Do you believe Carrie Chesterfield's extraordinary theory?" asked Mrs. Kington.

"H'm," Mrs. Mansley murmured doubtfully; "but the story's too mad for Marcus. Whatever he is he isn't cracked."

"I believe he suggested the whole thing to her to make her shut up!" said Lady Blackmore, unconsciously mimicking the phraseology of her youthful case.

"Remember *The Dawn*,' Polly!" exclaimed Mrs. Strachan. "It's true that Carrie's head has been rather turned since she wrote that book, but she isn't—it can't be the least like what you've put into my head. So 'Remember *The Dawn*!'"

"Bosh! Remember it yourself!" Lady Blackmore retorted, with spirit.

"That's right, old girl!" laughed her husband from behind, who was carrying her cloak; "don't you be put upon!"

But they had reached the crowded and gorgeous hall. The motors at the door buzzed and quivered like swarms of titanic bees gathering honey in Hades, the six Enlighteners separated and went on their different ways; but till they fell asleep Mrs. Chesterfield's story of her maid's aunt and her theory explaining it stood out as disturbing elements in their thoughts.

THE END

